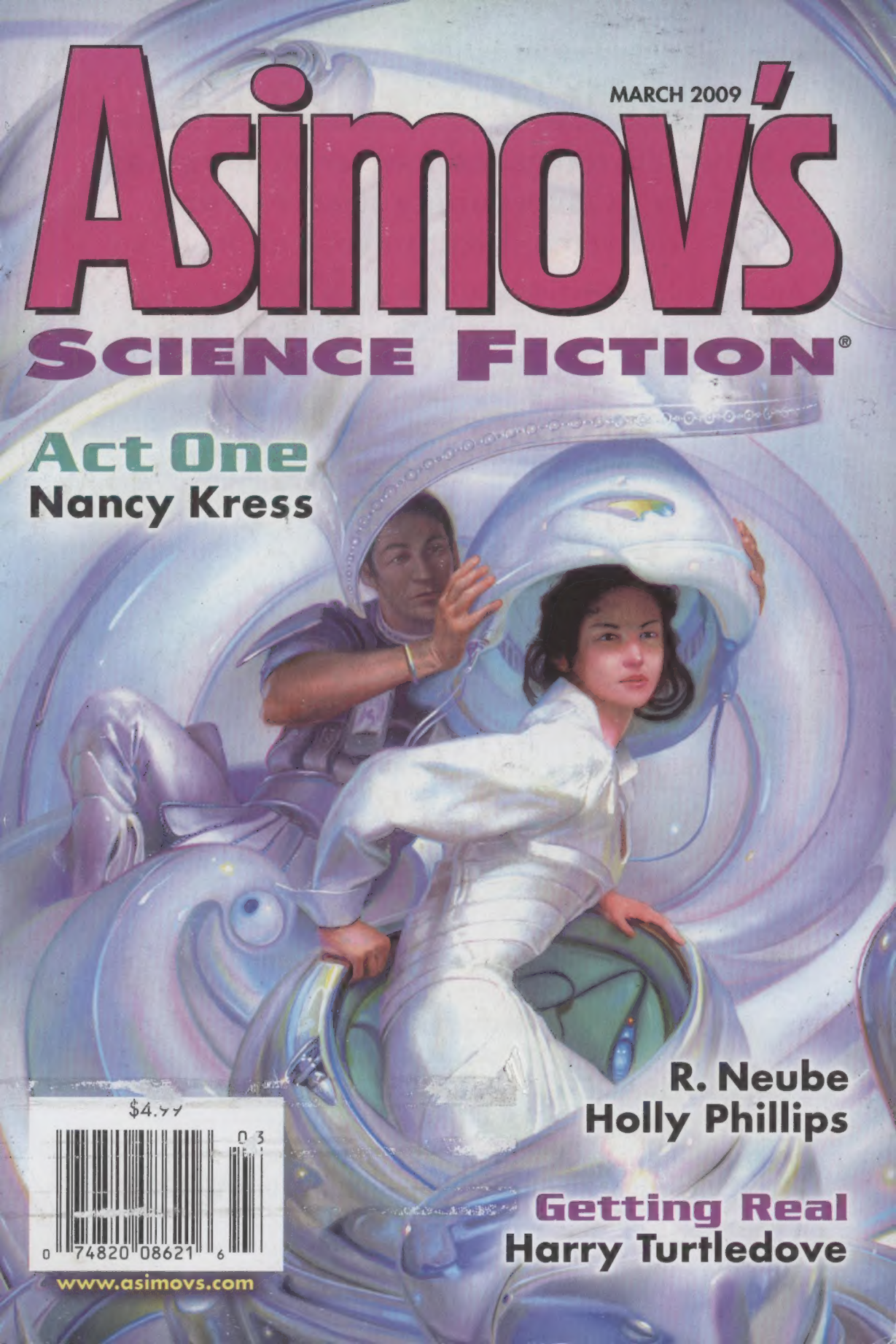

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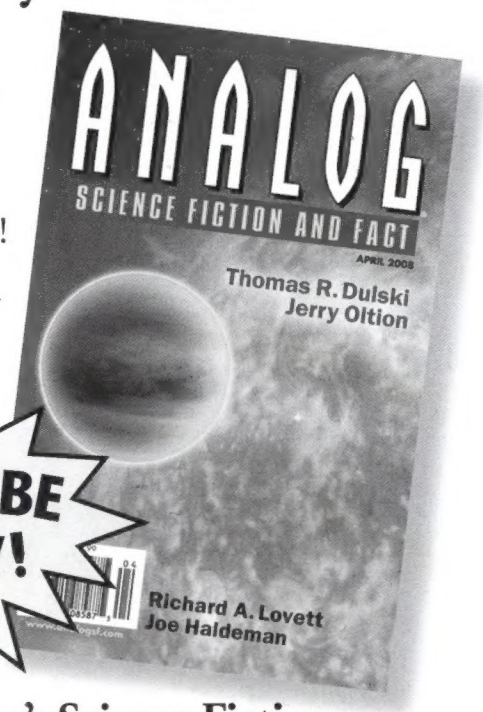
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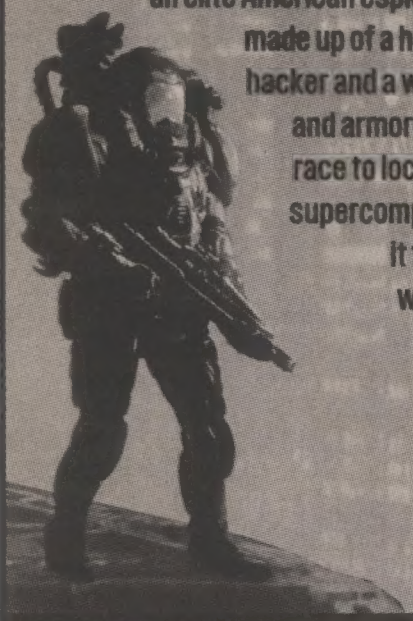
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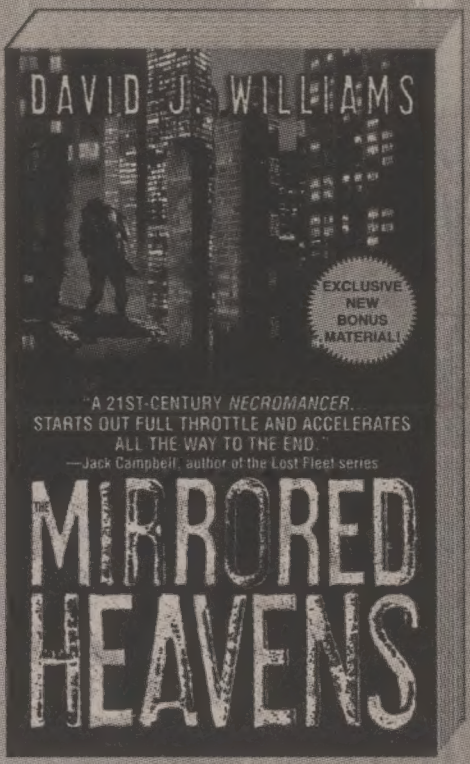
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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Brian Bieniowski

YOU MIGHT GO HOME AGAIN

Around the time Robert Silverberg began reassessing classic SF novels from yesteryear in his Reflections pieces, I was engaged in my own revisitation of the books I'd read as a boy. Would these works, so captivating and inspiring to a seventh grader, hold fast under the harsh glare of the thousands of competing pages since read? I picked a hard to find favorite, and hoped for the best.

I can recall the day I read aloud my book report on James Blish's *Welcome to Mars* to Mrs. Blumenthal's seventh-grade English class. It was December 6, 1988—the day Roy Orbison died. I spoke with great gusto about Dolph Haertel's historic trip to the Red Planet in his bread-boarded antigravity-driven packing crate loaded with enough K-rations and bottled oxygen to allow him to survive the overnight journey there and back. Dolph appeared so adult, compared to my own eleven years, and would have had the experience obviously necessary to invent a personal antigravity ship at the advanced age of eighteen. More exciting was the high adventure of Dolph's stranding on Mars (via faulty vacuum tube); his struggle for survival cloistered from the harsh environment; the eventual introduction of his girlfriend, Nanette—who, pluckily armed with only a sewing kit, had followed using Dolph's own notes and antigravity prototype. Add in a friendly, primitive cat-man for a Martian Friday and the doomed alien intelligence resting within a crystalline Martian city, awaiting the settlers who would become future Martians, and Blish had achieved perfection. The school principal, inexplicably attending our class that day, seemed convinced by the scientific merit of these events as I explained them, a rare triumph of my spotted academic career.

When read today, *Welcome to Mars* is a cold, dry book, with enriched educational content intended for 1967's school libraries' science fiction sections, where it appears to have enjoyed a brief and unremarkable life. Dolph's flight to Mars is described in loving detail with the scientific facts available before Mariner IV. His course when faced with stranding is the pure, blissful Boy Scout propaganda of self-reliance and adaptability now completely absent from today's SF. *Welcome to Mars 2009* would be thirteen pages long, featuring Dolph's spectacular crash-landing in his backyard and subsequent hospital trip for a broken collarbone. A cautionary tale for all ages: science is meant for experts, not kids with soldering irons.

The relationship between Dolph and Nanette—two teens marooned alone in a leaky packing crate for over a year—is handled with sexless sterility that makes *Beach Party* seem a veritable bacchanalia. I *was* surprised to note Blish's deft acknowledgement of Nanette's menses (affected by mischievous Martian moons) rather than ignore the reality altogether. I imagine that, at eleven, I blushed at the thought of this, and skimmed past it (and much of the science) to the fun parts.

When compared with Robert A. Heinlein's *Have Space Suit–Will Travel*, it's hard to remember where the fun parts in Blish's book were. Heinlein's future—spacesuits and ships built by corporations like Goodyear, not precocious pubescent faux-engineers—is a rollicking space adventure. The extrapolations are convincing and elegant; quite different from Blish's attempts, whose joints creak under the weight of exposition. Kip Russell, owner of a used-spacesuit won from a soap-slogan contest, is in the thick of more action during the first thirty pages of *Space Suit* than exists throughout the Blish book, despite *Welcome*'s aliens, fights for survival, and Nanette and Dolph's hyper-extended seven-minutes-in-heaven inside the crate. Heinlein's tone is frothy, likeable; Blish's plods along, ever the physics class proctor. And yet . . .

Welcome to Mars was the book I trea-

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sured and fantasized about months after I read it. It was my template of what SF should offer a young reader, full of deep emotive qualities that had mysteriously sublimated themselves out of the book by the time I reread it. Heinlein was clearly the far better writer of engaging juvenile fiction. Poor James Blish—seminal SF writer and critic—justly overshadowed by the top SF writer of his time, never had a chance. Though *Welcome* is more sensitive and introspective (the scene with the dying alien intelligence still haunted even the second time around), and mercifully lacks the self-satisfied pompousness of Heinlein's characters, it was no great contest. The classics remain so, despite the stress fractures and pitting of time, and the rest fall clean away.

But you *might* go home again, as I learned reading the final pages of Blish's unlamented *Welcome to Mars* at the advanced age of thirty-one:

> He saw a bearded figure, dressed like Nanette and himself in fresh green Space Force fatigues. His expression was hard to read behind all the whiskers, but his gaze was level and probing. . . . he looked lean and competent.
>
> "Anybody you know?" Mrs. Haertel said softly.
>
> "I don't—" Dolph started to say, and then stopped, for as he spoke, the stranger spoke too. He said exactly the same words.
>
> He was, in fact, only a reflection in the polished metal of the *von Braun*'s hull. The tall man was Dolph himself.

Seen through the unforgiving lens of adulthood, this scene's devastating power adopted a fresh, previously hidden meaning. The finale no longer exemplified just the inevitable aging toward experience and maturity—it was also about the unforeseen importance of the roads we take and their unintended effects upon us. *Welcome to Mars* and its ilk must be appreciated not for how they appear to us today, crude and unwieldy, but for the best qualities, transformative and sublime, that made SF the language expressing both our youth and adult aspirations. ❍

REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

DOOMSDAY

Some months back, discussing books I had been rereading lately, I spoke of Olaf Stapledon's epic of the far future, *Last and First Men*—the quintessential far-future epic, the key title in that entire subspecies of science fiction. Stapledon purports to be writing a history of the next two billion years or so of human evolution, carrying us through eighteen successive human species until the race, having weathered disaster after disaster and now dwelling on a terraformed Neptune, is confronted with a challenge beyond its immense ingenuity: the sun has come under "a continuous and increasing bombardment of ethereal vibrations, most of which were of incredibly high frequency, and of unknown potentiality," evidently emanating from a nearby supernova. This has caused old Sol to behave in a "deranged" way, and, as a result, says Stapledon's far-future narrator, "Probably within thirty thousand years life will be impossible anywhere within a vast radius of the sun, so vast a radius that it is quite impossible to propel our planet away fast enough to escape before the storm can catch us."

So it is the end for our solar system, and the end as well for the highly evolved, dazzlingly endowed Eighteenth Men. But the narrator, speaking to us from the very brink of extinction, provides this lovely epilog by way of summing up humanity's two billion years of cyclical striving: "Man himself, at the very least, is music, a brave theme that makes music also of its vast accompaniment, its matrix of storms and stars. Man himself in his degree is eternally a beauty in the eternal form of things. It is very good to have been man. And so we may go forward together with laughter in our hearts, and peace, thankful for the past, and for our own courage. For we shall make after all a fair conclusion to this brief music that is man."

It has always seemed quite sad to me that our splendid species is fated to be snuffed out in a mere two billion years, if we are to take Stapledon's elegant fantasy as embodying an accurate prediction. All our cleverness gone for naught, Shakespeare and Mozart and the iPod and penicillin and high-definition television and all the rest of our glorious achievements not only gone but not even forgotten, for there will be nobody here to forget us! But now the calculations of two astronomers, Klaus-Peter Schroeder of the University of Guanajato in Mexico and Robert Connon Smith of England's University of Sussex, have put my mind at rest. The clock is ticking for us, yes, and doomsday is approaching, but it is not nearly as close as the author of *Last and First Men* suggested, and, unlike Stapledon's Eighteenth Men, we have plenty of time to deal with the problem. They, two billion years in our future, had a mere thirty thousand years to figure out a solution, and couldn't do it. But we, say Drs. Schroeder and Smith, have a full 7.59 billion years to come up with an answer. How comforting that extra 5.59 billion years is! And what a nice sense of scientific precision is provided by ".59 billion years," so much more scientific-sounding than the vulgar "590 million years."

What is going to happen to our world, in the Schroeder-Smith version of the future, makes all our current little ecological scramblings around with hybrid automobiles and fluorescent lighting seem pretty much beside the point. We can be as green as can be, and give ourselves many brownie points for Saving the Planet, but the planet isn't going to be saveable, because the sun is going to keep on getting warmer and warmer and eventu-

ally conditions will become downright intolerable. We're not talking about global warming here. That's a purely local phenomenon resulting from our offloading of carbon dioxide and other so-called "greenhouse gases" into our own atmosphere. No, this is *solar* warming, an expansion of the sun's output. Most astronomers believe that such expansion goes on gradually but inexorably throughout the lifespan of any star, and that our sun, in the 4.5 billion years of its life, has already increased its luminosity by 40 percent. And nothing we could do will halt the process.

So, we are told, things will keep on getting hotter and muggier on Earth, until, about a billion years from now, the oceans will boil away. That will deal with the humidity problem, I suppose, but will create other serious but not wholly insoluble problems. We—if anything like "us" is still here, a billion years from now—aren't likely to be able to withstand the scorching heat of the expanded sun, but, given this much notice, we surely ought to be able to find some more comfortable place to live.

We see that in *Last and First Men*: Stapledon's Fifth Men, some four hundred million years in our future, organize a mass migration to Venus upon learning that our moon is about to disintegrate and bombard us with big troublesome fragments; and when, another half a billion years down the line, the Eighth Men discover that the sun is about to go nova and cook all the inner worlds, a second migration to Neptune is successfully carried out. So, too, I suppose, we, having been properly warned, will find ways of coping with the increased temperatures of Earth in the year One Billion, perhaps by burrowing underground but, more probably, by escaping from our overheated planet altogether. That would mean saying goodbye, of course, to the Great Pyramid of Giza and the Taj Mahal and the Grand Canyon, and all of Earth's other familiar wonders, but it's a safe bet that geological forces will have removed all those cherished landmarks from our ken anyway, even the Grand Canyon, long before those billion years have elapsed.

Bigger trouble is in store, though, and coping with that won't be nearly as simple. Go another 5.5 billion years down the line, say Drs. Schroeder and Smith, and we find the sun using up the last of the hydrogen in its core—that is, the fuel that it has been burning to generate its heat—and starting to burn the hydrogen in its outer layers. This will cause the core to shrink and the outer layers greatly to expand, turning the sun into a vast, tenuous red-giant star. That means sayonara for Mercury and Venus, which will be within the perimeter of our inflated sun. Earth has some chance of escaping the fate of those worlds, because the altered sun's gravitational pull will have diminished, causing Earth to move outward to something like the present orbit of Mars, where it might just escape being engulfed by the expanded solar mantle.

Even so, the prognosis isn't good. The risk is that Earth will gradually drift back sunward from its new orbit until it, too, is gobbled up. Calculations made in 2001 by two European scientists indicated a reasonable chance that that would not happen, but new figures developed by Dr. Schroeder of Guanajato and Manfred Cuntz of the University of Texas give our little globe no hope. Their numbers show that the transformations going on within the sun will cause it to throw off much more mass—and thus, paradoxically, grow much larger, increasing greatly in diameter even while becoming far more attenuated in substance. Instead of losing 25 percent of its mass while undergoing metamorphosis into a red giant, as was previously predicted, the sun will lose about one third—resulting in a star with a diameter 256 times as great as today's sun, and a luminosity 2,730 times greater. Not only will our inner-world neighbors be devoured, but the hapless Earth will find itself skimming just a short distance above the surface of the solar monster, and tidal forces will create a bulge in the sun that will exert a gravitational pull on the Earth, slowing its speed

of revolution and tugging it inexorably downward toward its doom. In the even longer run the sun itself will fare little better, going through a standard cataclysmic cycle of shrinking and expanding and shrinking again that will turn it, eventually, into a white dwarf star heading toward its ultimate burnout, further billions of years ahead in the future that we are not going to see.

So, then, the Schroeder-Smith clock is ticking, and we have a mere 7.59 billion years to deal with the problem.

Stapledon, who arrived at an intuitive vision of approximately this sort of bleak destiny back in 1930, made the men of his fictional distant future nimble enough to escape first to Venus and then to Neptune. But then, as the final solar catastrophe approached, even they had run out of places to hide, and the best they could manage was to look upon their coming doom with philosophical detachment: "Man is a fair spirit, whom a star conceived and a star kills." Even then, the stubborn humanity in them led them to conceive a plan to create "an artificial human dust capable of being carried forward on the sun's radiation, hardy enough to endure the conditions of a trans-galactic voyage of many millions of years, and yet intricate enough to bear the potentiality of life and of spiritual development." And so, as the book closes, they are about to seed the stars with their own successors, who, perhaps, will continue the human saga in some unimaginably alien manner under the light of some distant sun.

We, having more notice of the end than Stapledon's Last Men, are free to follow a similar path. Earth may be doomed, but the universe awaits us. At the moment, of course, political and financial difficulties seem to have stymied any sort of movement very far into space, but it's folly to think that the present slump in human space exploration is going to last forever. There's nothing like an imminent vast expansion of the sun to stimulate our agile species in the direction of self-defense. So we may—not soon, mind you, but sooner than it seems right now—start thinking about colonizing Mars or one of the more suitable moons of Jupiter or Saturn, which would get us out of reach of the first phase of the big temperature rise. We could even go one step beyond Stapledon's soaring vision and consider moving Earth itself into a safer orbit by making use of the gravitational force of comets or asteroids, as several astrophysicists have quite seriously proposed. (Though one of them, Dr. Gregory Laughlin of the University of California at Santa Cruz, has noted that "There are profound ethical issues involved, and the cost of failure . . . is unacceptably high.") And, finally, when the red-giant sun has begun its metamorphosis into that white dwarf and the entire solar system is without a source of heat, the beings who then inhabit the Earth—not the Eighteenth Men of Stapledon, but perhaps the Ninetieth Men or the Thousandth Men—will have to find some way to export their brand of humanity to the stars.

Dizzying stuff to think about, yes. A billion years ago there was nothing but microscopic life on Earth, and here we are talking about the "human" life-forms that will inhabit this place billions of years in the future. How likely are they to resemble us in any significant way?

Most science fiction abjures such Stapledonian vistas and deals instead with short-range stuff like the way computers will work in the twenty-second century, or the problem that space pirates will cause in the twenty-third. Stories like that don't leave one's mind whirling giddily, the way pondering the astrophysical problems of the year Five Billion can do. Would that our best writers would spend more time dealing with such things, say I, dizzy though they may make their readers in the process. It's the good kind of dizziness, the kind that science fiction excels at generating, the sort of vertiginous sensation that brought most of us to science fiction in the first place. ❍

On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

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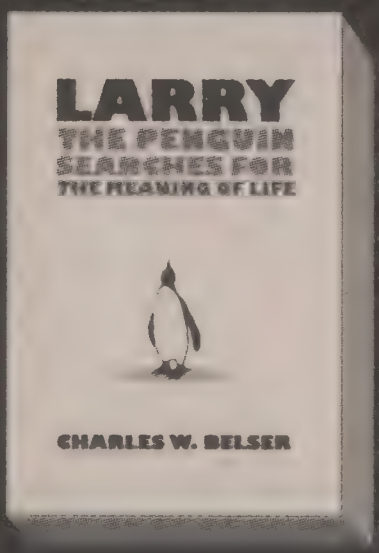
In the last installment we visited with some of the new stars of genre podcasting, writers who post spoken word versions of their novels on the net for downloading under a Creative Commons license. That means they're free, folks! Several years ago net pundits were declaring that podcasting was the Next Big Thing, and indeed, podcasts seemed to leap from rare to ubiquitous at the click of a mouse. More recently, their phenomenal growth has slowed. According to a **survey** *<http://pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Podcast_2008_Memo.pdf>* published in August 2008 by the **Pew Internet & American Life Project** *<pewinternet.org>*, about 19 percent of all internet users have downloaded a podcast, up from 12 percent in 2006. So although podcasting would seem to be a niche activity on the net, it is a substantial niche, since Pew also reported that last year some 165 million Americans used the net. And let's face it, the percentage of podcast patrons who are also readers of science fiction and fantasy is no doubt higher than that of the general population, since we fans of the fantastic have usually been among the earliest of early adopters.

In some corners of the genre, the give-it-away ethic is seen as an attack on publishing as we know it. However, all of the podcasters we spoke with last time hoped to parlay their successes online into traditional book deals and a career in print. One big selling point in their favor is the size of the audiences they've cultivated. **J.C. Hutchins** *<jchutchins.net>*, author of the 7th Son trilogy, reports, "I am able to look at statistics of downloads of my novels and I see that, because they are downloaded one chapter at a time, the first chapter in the book has a higher download rate than the most recent chapter. More than forty thousand people have downloaded the first chapter of my trilogy." Book one of Hutch's trilogy, *Descent,* will be published by **St. Martin's Press** *<us.macmillan.com/SMP.aspx>* in 2009. **Mur Lafferty** *<murverse.com>* began posting her superhero novel, *Playing for Keeps,* as a podcast in the fall of 2007. The print version was released by **Swarm Press** *<swarmpress.com>* in July of 2008. "I am at about twenty-three thousand for the first chapter. I released my PDF a couple of days before the book came out, and, so far just from my servers, it's been downloaded forty thousand times." *Playing for Keeps* recently won a **Parsec Award** *<parsecawards.com>* (yes, speculative fiction podcasters have their own award.) for Best Podcast Long Form. Fellow Parsec Long Form nominee **Tee Morris** *<teemorris.com>* reports fifty thousand downloads of the podcast of his novel *Billibub Baddings and the Case of the Singing Sword,* which was published in 2007 by **Dragon Moon Press** *<dragonmoonpress.com>*. As I was talking to Mur and Hutch at Balticon last year, new writer Christiana Ellis popped into the conversation. Her audiobook *Space Casey* had just won the **Mark Time Award** *<greatnorthern.com/MarkTime/MarkTime.html>* (yes, speculative fiction podcasters have *more than one* award!) and in August it won a Parsec as well for Best Audio Drama Short Form. She said that *Space Casey* had garnered upward of six thousand

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downloads in less than a year. A print edition of her previous podcast, *Nina Kimberly the Merciless,* is forthcoming from Dragon Moon Press.

But how many listeners will follow these writers to the bookstore? Hutch makes a point that bears consideration. "So when I approach an editor or agent, I can boast I was the first to do this or that in podcasting and that's great on paper. But the real meat of it is, will any of this translate into sales? And I think that the attrition rate is very high. Maybe only 10 percent will buy the book. So it would be a Christmas miracle if four thousand listeners bought the book." Suppose that Hutch is right and only 10 percent of listeners become readers. The question is, are those four thousand listeners *in addition* to the readers who might otherwise buy the book? If the answer is yes, then expect a raft of new writers to follow the example of these pioneer podcasters.

And maybe some old pros ought to take note as well.

must click

One thing that all of these writers have in common is that their podcasts have appeared on **Podiobooks.com** <*podiobooks.com*>. When I first wrote about podcasting back in 2006, Podiobooks.com was in beta. Co-founded by **Evo Terra** <*funanymore.com*>, Tee Morris, and **Chris Miller** <*unquietdesperation.com*>, it has become the most important portal for serialized novel podcasts. As I type this, it features two hundred and forty-seven titles and 4,978 individual episodes. In my opinion, it has been essential to the creation of the listenership that my podcasting pals enjoy. It was and is an important showcase where unknown podcasters can debut their work and it has become the center of the community that has grown up around genre novel podcasting.

If Podiobooks.com has led the way in novel podcasting, **Escape Pod** <*escapepod.org*> is without doubt the premier SF short fiction podcast site. According to founder Steve Eley, as of March 2008, each weekly episode had a download of about eighteen thousand, which led him to claim—with justification, it says here—that his site is the second largest market for short science fiction. That includes not just podcasts, but ezines and print magazines like our own beloved *Asimov's*. And its success has led Steve to spin off two sister sites, **Pseudopod** <*pseudopod.org*>, which specializes in horror, and **Podcastle** <*podcastle.org*>, "the world's first fantasy audio magazine." All three of these sites are paying markets with editors acquiring both new and reprint stories. The fiction remains copyrighted by the authors, while the performances are released under a Creative Commons license. It is Steve's policy that authors not be allowed to read their own works—a policy with which I respectfully disagree, but don't get me started!—but that is the only cavil I can offer about these wonderful sites. As the Pod Empire has expanded, it has attracted an eclectic mix of hot new writers and celebrated masters. Take, for example, **Peter Beagle** <*peterbeagle.com*>, **Elizabeth Bear** <*elizabethbear.com*>, **Andy Duncan** <*beluthahatchie.blogspot.com*>, **Charles Coleman Finlay** <*ccfinlay.com*>, **Nancy Kress** <*sff.net/people/nankress*>, **Tim Pratt** <*timpratt.com*>, **Sarah Prineas** <*sarahprineas.com*>, **Cat Rambo** <*kittywumpus.net*>, **Mike Resnick** <*fortunecity.com/tattooine/farmer/2*>, and **Greg Van Eekhout** <*www.writingandsnacks.com*>, to name but ten.

pod these

Although Steve Eley's sites have set a very high standard for online audio short fiction, they are by no means the last word. From across the pond, for example, comes the excellent **Starship Sofa** <*starshipsofa.com*>. Let's let host Tony C. Smith tell you a little about the

sho: "On Wednesday nights we have Aural Delights. Think of it as a kind of audio science fiction magazine in the realms of the greats like *Asimov's* and *Analog*. We have a little bit of poetry, a little bit of flash fiction, short stories, and articles." On the weekends Tony alternates three other shows, the original Starship Sofa, which focuses in depth on the careers of some of the greats of the genre; the Engine Room, which takes you behind the scenes of the Aural Delights podcast; and the Roundtable, in which Tony and his cohorts dissect the stories that have appeared on Aural Delights.

Then there is **Variant Frequencies** <*http://www.variantfrequencies.com*>, a monthly podcast of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, which features professional narration and slick production values. Produced by Rick Stringer, this show was one of the first regular short fiction podcasts. Its contributors are mostly new writers who bring a fresh perspective to the many worlds of the fantastic. The folks at Variant Frequencies must be doing something very right, since they have won a Parsec every year since the awards were first handed out.

Transmissions From Beyond <*transmissionsfrombeyond.com*> is an exciting new podcast from **TTA Press** <*ttapress.com*> with new stories appearing every Monday. Well, not exactly new, but new to podcast. The stories on Transmissions From Beyond are drawn from TTA Press's three print magazines: SF and fantasy from *Interzone,* the UK's longest running speculative fiction magazine; horror from *Black Static*; and crime and mystery from *Crimewave*. These are stories with an English accent, but they are without doubt some of the finest to be found on the web today.

Speaking of promotional podcasts, one of the most blogged-about site launches in recent memory is the new **Tor.com** <*Tor.com*>. Just about from the get-go it has joined the ranks of **Locus Online** <*locusmag.com*>, **SF Signal** <*sfsignal.com*>, and **Sci Fi Weekly** <*scifi.com/sfw*>—sites that I click almost every day. While it is perhaps best known for the lively conversations going on in its Community Pages, it has also begun to publish original stories by the likes of **Cory Doctorow** <*craphound.com*>, **Steve Gould** <*digitalnoir.com*>, and **John Scalzi** <*scalzi.com/whatever*>. You can read these stories online, download them as pdfs, and listen to them as podcasts. Although the sound quality of the podcasts is not up to those of, say, Podcastle or Variant Frequencies, the stories are read, unless my ear deceives me, by the authors themselves.

exit

So what are podcasts good for? To some extent, our survey of the pod landscape shows that they are being used for promotional purposes. Some writers are using them to promote their careers and some publishers are using them to attract readers. On the other hand, there are many, many podcasters who are in it for the joy of expressing themselves and because podcasting has some of the coolest toys on the internet. The exception would seem to be Steve Eley's Empire of Pod. In March of 2008, he posted a "metacast" in which he talks about "the state of the podcast, the state of the business, Escape Artists Inc., and, to a certain extent, the State of the Steve." I read this with great interest, because in it he is talking about the sites, not as a hobby or a promotional tool but as a going concern. "I have a plan. It's a concrete plan. I have a list of actions to be performed, and these actions will make us a viable profit-making company."

This I've got to hear! ❍

ACT ONE

Nancy Kress

Nancy Kress has won one Hugo and four Nebulas, most recently for "Fountain of Age" (*Asimov's,* July 2007). She is the author of twenty-six books, the latest of which is *Steal Across the Sky* (Tor, February 2009). Nancy spent the autumn of last year in Leipzig, Germany, teaching at the university there. Her SF course was organized around the concept of deliberately invented future societies. In "Act One," a future society is also invented—although not by changing political and economic considerations. Other ways may be more effective . . .

"To understand whose movie it is one needs to look not particularly at the script but at the deal memo."

—Joan Didion

I eased down the warehouse's basement steps behind the masked boy, one hand on the stair rail, wishing I'd worn gloves. Was this level of grime really necessary? It wasn't; we'd already passed through some very sophisticated electronic surveillance, as well as some very unsophisticated personal surveillance that stopped just short of a body-cavity search, although an unsmiling man did feel around inside my mouth. Soap cost less than surveillance, so probably the grime was intentional. The Group was making a statement. That's what we'd been told to call them: "The Group." Mysterious, undefined, pretentious.

The stairs were lit only by an old-fashioned forty-watt bulb somewhere I couldn't see. Behind me, Jane's breath quickened. I'd insisted on going down first, right behind our juvenile guide, from a sense of—what? "Masculine protection" from me would be laughable. And usually I like to keep Jane where I can see her. It works out better that way.

"Barry?" she breathed. The bottom of the steps was so shrouded in gloom that I had to feel my way with one extended foot.

"Two more steps, Janie."

"Thank you."

Then we were down and she took a deep breath, standing closer to me than she usually does. Her breasts were level with my face. Jane is only five-six, but that's seventeen inches taller than I am. The boy said, "A little way more." Across the cellar a door opened, spilling out light. "There."

It had been a laundry area once, perhaps part of an apartment for some long-dead maintenance man. Cracked washtubs, three of them, sagged in one corner. No windows, but the floor had been covered with a clean, thin rug and the three waiting people looked clean, too. I scanned them quickly. A tall, hooded man holding an as-

sault rifle, his eyes the expression of bodyguards everywhere: alert but nonanalytic. An unmasked woman in jeans and baggy sweater, staring at Jane with unconcealed resentment. Potential trouble there. And the leader, who came forward with his hand extended, smiling. "Welcome, Miss Snow. We're honored."

I recognized him immediately. He was a type rampant in political life, which used to be my life. Big, handsome, too pleased with himself and his position to accurately evaluate either. He was the only one not wearing jeans, dressed in slacks and a sports coat over a black turtleneck. If he had been a pol instead of a geno-terrorist, he'd have maybe gotten as far as city council executive, and then would have run for mayor, lost, and never understood why. So this was a low-level part of the Group's operation, which was probably good. It might lessen the danger of this insane expedition.

"Thank you," Jane said in that famous voice, low and husky and as thrilling off screen as on. "This is my manager, Barry Tenler."

I was more than her manager, but the truth was too complicated to explain. The guy didn't even glance at me and I demoted him from city council executive to ward captain. You *always* pay attention to the advisors. That's usually where the brains are, if not the charisma.

Ms. Resentful, on the other hand, switched her scrutiny from Jane to me. I recognized the nature of that scrutiny. I've felt it all my life.

Jane said to the handsome leader, "What should I call you?"

"Call me Ishmael."

Oh, give me a break. Did that make Jane the white whale? He was showing off his intellectual moves, with no idea they were both banal and silly. But Jane gave him her heart-melting smile and even I, who knew better, would have sworn it was genuine. She might not have made a movie in ten years, but she still had it.

"Let's sit down," Ishmael said.

Three kitchen chairs stood at the far end of the room. Ishmael took one, the bodyguard and the boy standing behind him. Ms. Resentful took another. Jane sank cross-legged to the rug in a graceful puddle of filmy green skirt.

That was done for my benefit. My legs and spine hurt if I have to stand for more than a few minutes, and she knows how I hate sitting even lower than I already am. Ishmael, shocked and discerning nothing, said, "Miss Snow!"

"I think better when I'm grounded," she said, again with her irresistible smile. Along with her voice, that smile launched her career thirty-five years ago. Warm, passionate, but with an underlying wistfulness that bypassed the cerebrum and went straight to the primitive hind-brain. Unearned—she was born with those assets—but not unexploited. Jane was a lot shrewder than her fragile blonde looks suggested. The passion, however, was real. When she wanted something, she wanted it with every sinew, every nerve cell, every drop of her acquisitive blood.

Now her graceful Sitting-Bull act left Ishmael looking awkward on his chair. But he didn't do the right thing, which would have been to join her on the rug. He stayed on his chair and I demoted him even further, from ward captain to go-fer. I clambered up onto the third chair. Ishmael gazed down at Jane and swelled like a pouter pigeon at having her, literally, at his feet. Ms. Resentful scowled. Uneasiness washed through me.

The Group knew who Jane Snow was. Why would they put this meeting in the hands of an inept narcissist? I could think of several reasons: to indicate contempt for her world. To preserve the anonymity of those who actually counted in this most covert of organizations. To pay off a favor that somebody owed to Ishmael, or to Ishmael's keeper. To provide a photogenic foil to Jane, since of course we were being recorded. Any or all of these reasons would be fine with me. But my uneasiness didn't abate.

Jane said, "Let's begin then, Ishmael, if it's all right with you."

"It's fine with me," he said. His back was to the harsh light, which fell full on both Jane and Ms. Resentful. The latter had bad skin, small eyes, lanky hair, although her lips were lovely, full and red, and her neck above the windbreaker had the taut firmness of youth.

The light was harder on Jane. It showed up the crow's feet, the tired inelasticity of her skin under her flawless make-up. She was, after all, fifty-four, and she'd never gone under the knife. Also, she'd never been really beautiful, not as Angelina Jolie or Catherine Zeta-Jones had once been beautiful. Jane's features were too irregular, her legs and butt too heavy. But none of that mattered next to the smile, the voice, the green eyes fresh as new grass, and the powerful sexual glow she gave off so effortlessly. *It's as if Jane Snow somehow received two sets of female genes at conception*, a critic wrote once, *doubling everything we think of as "feminine." That makes her either a goddess or a freak.*

"I'm preparing for a role in a new movie," she said to Ishmael, although of course he already knew that. She just wanted to use her voice on him. "It's going to be about your . . . your organization. And about the future of the little girls. I've talked to some of them and—"

"Which ones?" Ms. Resentful demanded.

Did she really know them all by name? I looked at her more closely. Intelligence in those small, stony eyes. She could be from the Group's headquarter cell—wherever it was—and sent to ensure that Ishmael didn't screw up this meeting. Or not. But if she were really intelligent, would she be so enamored of someone like Ishmael?

Stupid question. Three of Jane's four husbands had been gorgeous losers.

Jane said, "Well, so far I've only talked to Rima Ridley-Jones. But Friday I have the whole afternoon with the Barrington twins."

Ishmael, unwilling to have the conversation migrate from him, said, "Beautiful children, those twins. And very intelligent." As if the entire world didn't already know that. Unlike most of the Group's handiwork, the Barrington twins had been posed by their publicity-hound parents on every magazine cover in the world. But Jane smiled at Ishmael as if he'd just explicated Spinoza.

"Yes, they are beautiful. Please, Ishmael, tell me about your organization. Anything that might help me prepare for my role in *Future Perfect*."

He leaned forward, hands on his knees, handsome face intent. Dramatically, insistently, he intoned, "There is one thing you must understand about the Group, Jane. A very critical thing. *You will never stop us*."

Portentous silence.

The worst thing was, he might be right. The FBI, CIA, IRS, HPA, and several other alphabets had lopped off a few heads, but still the hydra grew. It had so many supporters: liberal lawmakers and politicians, who wanted the Anti-Genetic Modification Act revoked and the Human Protection Agency dismantled. The rich parents who wanted their embryos enhanced. The off-shore banks that coveted the Group's dollars and the Caribbean or Mexican or who-knows-what islands that benefited from sheltering their mobile labs.

"We are idealists," Ishmael droned on, "and we are the future. Through our efforts, mankind will change for the better. Wars will end, cruelty will disappear. When people can—"

"Let me interrupt you for just a moment, Ishmael." Jane widened her eyes and over-used his name. Her dewy look up at him from the floor could have reversed desertification. She was pulling out all the stops. "I need so *much* to understand, Ishmael. If you genemod these little girls, one by one, you end up changing such a small percentage of the human race that . . . how many children have been engineered with Arlen's Syndrome?"

"We prefer the term 'Arlen's Advantage.' "

"Yes, of course. How many children?"

I held my breath. The Group had never given out that information.

Jane put an entreating hand on Ishmael's knee.

He said loftily, hungrily, "That information is classified," and I saw that he didn't know the answer.

Ms. Resentful said, "To date, three thousand two hundred fourteen."

Was she lying? My instincts—and I have very good instincts, although to say that in *this* context is clearly a joke—said no. Resentful knew the number. So she *was* higher up than Ishmael. And since she sure as hell wasn't responding to Jane's allure, that meant the Group now wanted the numbers made public.

"Yes, that's right," Ishmael said hastily, "three thousand two hundred fourteen children."

Jane said, "But that's not a high percentage out of six billion people on Earth, is it? It—"

"Five ten-millionth of 1 percent," I said. A silly, self-indulgent display, but what the hell. My legs ached.

She always could ad-lib. "Yes, thank you, Barry. But my question was for Ishmael. If only such a tiny percentage of humanity possesses Arlen's Advantage, even if the genemod turns out to be inheritable—"

"It is," Ishmael said, which was nonsense. The oldest Arlen's kids were only twelve.

"Wonderful!" Jane persisted. "But as I say, if only such a tiny percentage of humanity possesses the Advantage, how can the Group hope to alter the entire human future?"

Ishmael covered her hand with his. He smiled down at her, and his eyes actually twinkled. "Jane, Jane, Jane. Have you ever dropped a pebble into a pond?"

"Yes."

"And what happened, my dear?"

"A ripple."

"Which spread and spread until the entire pond was affected!" Ishmael spread his arms wide. The ass couldn't even put together a decent analogy. Humanity was an ocean, not a pond, and water ripples were always transitory. But Jane, actress that she was, beamed at him and moved the conversation to something he could handle.

"I see. Tell me, Ishmael, how you personally became involved in the Group."

He was thrilled to talk about himself. As he did, Jane skillfully extracted information about the Group's make-up, its organization, its communications methods. Resentful let her do it. I watched the young woman, who was watching Ishmael but not in a monitoring sort of way. He couldn't give away really critical information; he didn't have any. Still, he talked too much. He was the kind of man who responded to an audience, who could easily become so expansive that he turned indiscreet. Sooner or later, I suspected, he would say something to somebody that he shouldn't, and the Group would dump him.

Ms. Resentful wasn't anything near the actress Jane that was. Her hunger for this worthless man was almost palpable. I might have felt sympathy for her pain if my own wasn't increasing so much in my legs, back, neck. I seldom sat this long, and never on a hard chair.

My particular brand of dwarfism, achondroplasia, accounts for 70 percent of all cases. Malformed bones and cartilage produce not only the short limbs, big head and butt, and pushed-in face that all the media caricaturists so adore but also, in some of us, constriction of the spinal canal that causes pain. Especially as achons age, and I was only two years younger than Jane. Multiple excruciating operations have only helped me so much.

After an hour and a half, Jane rose, her filmy skirt swirling around her lovely calves. My uneasiness spiked sharply. If anything was going to happen, it would be now.

But nothing did happen. The masked boy reappeared and we were led out of the dingy basement. I could barely walk. Jane knew better than to help me, but she whispered, "I'm so sorry, Barry. But this was my only chance."

"I know." Somehow I made it up the stairs. We navigated the maze of the abandoned warehouse, where the Group's unseen soldiers stayed at stand-off with our own unseen bodyguards. Blinking in the sunlight, I suddenly collapsed onto the broken concrete.

"Barry!"

"It's . . . okay. *Don't.*"

"The rest will be so much easier . . . I promise!"

I got myself upright, or what passes for upright. The unmarked van arrived for us. The whole insane interview had gone off without a hitch, without violence, smooth as good chocolate.

So why did I still feel so uneasy?

An hour later, Jane's image appeared all over the Net, the TV, the wallboards. Her words had been edited to appear that she was a supporter, perhaps even a member, of the Group. But of course we had anticipated this. The moment our van left the warehouse, the first of the pre-emptory spots I'd prepared aired everywhere. They featured news avatar CeeCee Collins, who was glad for the scoop, interviewing Jane about her meeting. Dedicated actress preparing for a role, willing to take any personal risk for art, not a believer in breaking the law but valuing open discourse on this important issue, and so forth. The spots cost us a huge amount of money. They were worth it. Not only was the criticism defused, but the publicity for the upcoming movie, which started principal photography in less than a month, was beyond price.

I didn't watch my spots play. Nor was I there when the FBI, CIA, HPA, etc. paid Jane the expected visit to both "debrief" her and/or threaten her with arrest for meeting with terrorists. But I didn't need to be there. Before our meeting, I'd gotten Jane credentials under the Malvern-Murphy Press Immunity Act, plus Everett Murphy as her more-than-capable lawyer. Everett monitored the interviews and I stayed in bed under a painkiller. The FBI, CIA, HPA wanted to meet with me, too, of course, once Jane told them I'd been present. They had to wait until I could see them. I didn't mind them cooling their heels as they waited for me, not at all.

Why are you so opposed to genemods? Jane had asked me once, and only once, not looking at me as she said it. She meant, *Why you, especially*? Usually I answered Jane, trusted Jane, but not on this. I told her the truth: *You wouldn't understand.* To her credit, she hadn't been offended. Jane was smart enough to know what she didn't know.

Now, on my lovely pain patch, I floated in a world where she and I walked hand in hand through a forest the green of her filmy skirt, and she had to crane her neck to smile up at me.

The next few days, publicity for the picture exploded. Jane did interview after interview: TV, LinkNet, robocam, print, holonews. She glowed with the attention, looking ten years younger. Some of the interviewers and avatars needled her, but she stuck to the studio line: This is a movie about people, not polemics. *Future Perfect* is not really about genetic engineering. It will be an honest examination of eternal verities, of our shared frailty and astonishing shared strength, of what makes us human, of blah blah blah, that just happens to use Arlen's Syndrome as a vehicle. The script was nearly finished and it would be complex and realistic and blah blah blah.

"*Pro or con on genemods*?" an exasperated journalist finally shouted from the back of the room.

Jane gave him a dazzling smile. "Complex and realistic," she said.

Both the pros and the cons would be swarming into the theater, unstoppable as lemmings.

I felt so good about all of this that I decided to call Leila. I needed to be in a good mood to stand these calls. Leila wasn't home, letting me get away with just a message, which made me feel even better.

Jane, glowing on camera, was wiping out a decade of cinematic obscurity with *Future Perfect*. I couldn't wipe out my fifteen years of guilt that easily, nor would I do so even if I could. But I was still glad that Leila wasn't home.

Jane had promised that Friday's role-prep interview would be easier on me. She was wrong.

The Barrington twins lived with their parents and teen-age sister in San Luis Obispo. Jane's pilot obtained clearance to land on the green-velvet Barrington lawn, well behind the estate's heavily secured walls. I wouldn't have to walk far.

"Welcome, Miss Snow. An *honor*." Frieda Barrington was mutton dressed as lamb, a fiftyish woman in a brief skirt and peek-a-boo caped sweater. Slim, toned, tanned, but the breasts doing the peek-a-booing would never be twenty again, and her face had the tense lines of those who spent most of their waking time pretending not to be tense.

Jane climbed gracefully from the flyer and stood so that her body shielded my awkward descent. I seized the grab bar, sat on the flyer floor, fell heavily onto the grass, and scrambled to my feet. Jane moved aside, her calf-length skirt—butter yellow, this time—blowing in the slight breeze. "Call me Jane. This is my manager, Barry Tenler."

Frieda Barrington was one of Those. Still, she at least tried to conceal her distaste. "Hello, Mr. Tenler."

"Hi." With any luck, this would be the only syllable I had to address to her.

We walked across the grass through perfect landscaping, Frieda supplying the fund of inane chatter that such women always have at their disposal. The house had been built a hundred years earlier for a silent-film star. Huge, pink, gilded at windows and doors, it called to mind an obese lawn flamingo. We entered a huge foyer floored in black-and-white marble, which managed to look less Vermeer than checkerboard. A sulky girl in dirty jeans lounged on a chaise longue. She stared at us over the garish cover of a comic book.

"Suky, get up," Frieda snapped. "This is Miss Snow and her manager Mr., uh, Tangler. My daughter Suky."

The girl got up, made an ostentatious and mocking curtsey, and lay down again. Frieda made a noise of outrage and embarrassment, but I felt sorry for Suky. Fifteen—the same age as Ethan—plain of face, she was caught between a mother who'd appropriated her fashions and twin sisters who appropriated all the attention. Frieda would be lucky if Suky's rebellion stopped at mere rudeness. I made her a mock little bow to match her curtsey, and watched as her eyes widened with surprise. I grinned.

Frieda snapped, "Where are the twins?"

Suky shrugged. Frieda rolled her eyes and led us through the house.

They were playing on the terrace, a sun-shaded sweep of weathered stone with steps that led to more lawn, all backed by a gorgeous view of vineyards below the Sierra Madres. Frieda settled us on comfortable, padded chairs. A robo-server rolled up, offering lemonade.

Bridget and Belinda came over to us before they were called. "Hello!" Jane said with her melting smile, but neither girl answered. Instead, they gazed steadily, unblinkingly at her for a full thirty seconds, and then did the same with me. I didn't like it, or them.

Arlen's Syndrome, like all genetic tinkering, has side effects. No one knows that better than I. Achondroplasia dwarfism is the result of a single nucleotide substitution in the gene FGFR3 at codon 380 on chromosome 4. It affects the growth of bones and cartilage, which in turn affects air passages, nerves, and other people's tolerance. Exactly which genes were involved in Arlen's were a trade secret, but the modifications undoubtedly spread across many genes, with many side effects. But since only females could be genemod for Arlen's, the X chromosome was one of those altered. That much, at least, was known.

The two eleven-year-old girls staring at me so frankly were small for their age, delicately built: fairy children. They had white skin, silky fair hair cut in short caps, and eyes of luminous gray. Other than that, they didn't look much alike, fraternal twins rather than identical. Bridget was shorter, plumper, prettier. From a Petri-dishful of Frieda's fertilized eggs, the Barringtons had chosen the most promising two, had them genemoded for Arlen's Syndrome, and implanted them in Frieda's ageing but still serviceable womb. The loving parents, both exhibitionists, had splashed across the worldwide media every last detail—except where and how the work had been done. Unlike Rima Ridley-Jones, the Arlen's child that Jane had spoken with last week, these two were carefully manufactured celebrities.

Jane tried again. "I'm Jane Snow, and you're Bridget and Belinda. I'm glad to meet you."

"Yes," Belinda said, "you are." She looked at me. "But you're not."

There was no point in lying. Not to them. "Not particularly."

Bridget said, with a gentleness surprising in one so young, "That's okay, though."

"Thank you," I said.

"*I* didn't say it was okay," Belinda said.

There was no answer to that. The Ridley-Jones child hadn't behaved like this; in addition to shielding her from the media, her mother had taught her manners. Frieda, on the other hand, leaned back in her chair like a spectator at a play, interested in what her amazing daughters would say next, but with anxiety on overdrive. I had the sense she'd been here before. Eleven-year-olds were no longer adorable, biddable toddlers.

"You'll never get it," Belinda said to me, at the same moment that Bridget put a hand on her sister's arm. Belinda shook it off. "Let me alone, Brid. He should know. They all should know." She smiled at me and I felt something in my chest recoil from the look in her gray eyes.

"You'll never get it," Belinda said to me with that horrible smile. "No matter what you do, Jane will never love you. And she'll always hate it when you touch her even by mistake. Just like she hates it now. Hates it, hates it, hates it."

It started with a dog.

Dr. Kenneth Bernard Arlen, a geneticist and chess enthusiast, owned a toy poodle. Poodles are a smart breed. Arlen played chess twice a week in his Stanford apartment with Kelson Hughes from Zoology. Usually they played three, four, or five games in a row, depending on how careless Hughes got with his end game. Cosette lay on the rug, dozing, until checkmate of the last game, when she always began barking frantically to protest Hughes's leaving. The odd thing was that Cosette began barking *before* the men rose, as they replaced the chessmen for what might, after all, have been the start of just another game. How did she know it wasn't?

Hughes assumed pheromones. He, or Arlen, or both, probably gave off a different smell as they decided to call it a night. Pheromones were Hughes's field of research; he'd done significant work in mate selection among mice based on smell. He had a graduate student remove the glomeruli from adult dogs and put them through tests to see how various of their learned responses to humans changed. The responses didn't change. It wasn't pheromones.

Now not only Hughes but also Arlen was intensely intrigued. The Human Genome Project had just slid into Phase 2, discovering which genes encoded for what proteins, and how. Arlen was working with Turner's Syndrome, a disorder in which females were born missing all or part of one of their two X chromosomes. The girls had not only physical problems but social ones; they seemed to have trouble with even simple social interactions. What interested Hughes was that Turner Syndrome girls with an intact paternal X gene, the one inherited from the father, managed far better socially than those with the maternal X functioning. Something about picking up social cues was coded for genetically, and on the paternal X.

Where else did social facility reside in the genome? What cues of body language, facial expression, or tone of voice was Cosette picking up? Somehow the dog knew that when Hughes and Arlen set the chessmen in place, this wasn't the start of a new game. Something, dictated at least in part by Cosette's genes, was causing processes in her poodle brain. After all, Hughes's dog, a big dumb Samoyed, never seemed to anticipate anything. Snowy was continually surprised by gravity.

Arlen found the genes in dogs. It took him ten years, during which he failed to get tenure because he wouldn't publish. After Stanford let him go, he still didn't publish. He found the genes in humans. He still didn't publish. Stone broke, he was well on the way to bitter and yet with his idealism undimmed—an odd combination, but not unknown among science fanatics. Inevitably, he crossed paths with people even more fanatical. Kenneth Bernard Arlen joined forces with off-shore backers to open a fertility clinic that created super-empathic children.

Empathy turns up early in some children. A naturally empathic nine-month-old will give her teddy bear to another child who is crying; the toddler senses how bad the other child feels. People who score high in perceiving others' emotions are more popular, more outgoing, better adjusted, more happily married, more successful at their jobs. Arlen's Syndrome toddlers understood—not verbally, but in their limbic systems—when Mommy was worried, when Daddy wanted them to go potty, that Grandma loved them, that a stranger was dangerous.

If his first illegal, off-shore experiments with human germ lines had resulted in deformities, Arlen would have been crucified. There were no deformities. Prospective clients loved the promise of kids who actually understood how *parents* felt. By six or seven, Arlen's Syndrome kids could, especially if they were bright, read an astonishing array of non-verbal signals. By nine or ten, it was impossible to lie to them. As long as you were honest and genuinely had their best interests in mind, the children were a joy to live with: sensitive, cooperative, grateful, aware.

And yet here was Belinda Barrington, staring at me from her pale eyes, and I didn't need a genetic dose of super-empathy to see her glee at embarrassing me. I couldn't look at Jane. The blood was hot in my face.

Frieda said, sharply and hopelessly, "Belinda, that's not nice."

"No, it's not," Bridget said. She frowned at her sister, and Belinda actually looked away for a moment. Her twin had some childish control over Belinda, and her mother didn't. "Tell him you're sorry."

"Sorry," Belinda muttered, unconvincingly. So they could lie, if not be lied to.

Frieda said to Jane, "This is new behavior. I'm sure it's just a phase. Nothing you'd want to include in your project!"

Belinda shot her mother a look of freezing contempt.

Jane took control of the sorry situation. Sparing me any direct glance, she said to Belinda, "Did anybody tell you why I want to talk to you girls?"

"No," Belinda said. "You're not a reporter."

"I'm a movie actress."

Bridget brightened. "Like Kylie Kicker?" Apparently Arlen's Advantage did not confer immunity to inane kiddie pop culture.

"Not as young," Jane smiled, "or as rich. But I'm making a movie about the lives that girls like you might have when you're grown up. That's why I want to get to know you a little bit now. But only if it's okay with you."

The twins looked at each other. Neither spoke, but I had the impression that gigabytes passed between them. Frieda said, "Girls, I hope you'll cooperate with Miss Snow. She—"

"No, you don't," Belinda said, almost absently. "You don't like her. She's too pretty. But *we* like her."

Frieda's face went a mottled maroon. Bridget, her plump features alarmed, put a hand on her mother's arm. But Frieda shook it off, started to say something, then abruptly stood and stalked into the house. Bridget made a move to follow but checked herself. To me—*why*?—she said apologetically, "She wants to be alone a little while."

"You should go with her," Belinda said, and I didn't have to be told twice. These kids gave me the creeps.

Not that even they, with their overpraised empathy, could ever understand why.

In the foyer, Suky still lay on the chaise longue with her comic book. There was no sign of her mother. The other chairs were all mammoth leather things, but a low antique bench stood against one wall and I clambered painfully onto it and called a cab. I would have to walk all the way to the front gate to meet it, but the thought of going back in the flyer with Jane was unbearable. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the wall. My back and legs ached, but nothing compared to my heart.

It wasn't the words Belinda had said. Yes, I loved Jane and yes, that love was hopeless. I already knew that and so must Jane. How could she not? I was with her nearly every day; she was a woman sensitive to nuance. I knew she hated my accidental touch, and hated herself for that, and could help none of it. Three of Jane's husbands had been among the best-looking men on the planet. Tall, strong, straight-limbed. I had seen Jane's flesh glow rosy just because James or Karl or Duncan was in the same room with her. I had felt her hide her recoil from me.

"*Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me*." How often as a child had I chanted that to myself after another in the endless string of bullies had taunted me? *Short Stuff, Dopey, Munchkin, Big Butt, Mighty Midget, Oompa Loompa, cripple*. . . . Belinda hadn't illuminated any new truth for anybody. What she *had* done was speak it aloud.

"*Give sorrow words*"—but even Shakespeare could be as wrong as nursery chants. Something unnamed could, just barely, be ignored. Could be kept out of daily interaction, could almost be pretended away. What had been "given words" could not. And now tomorrow and the next day and the day after that, Jane and I would have to try to work together, would avoid each other's eyes, would each tread the dreary internal treadmill: Is he/she upset? Did I brush too close, stay too far away, give off any hurtful signal . . . *For God's sake, leave me alone*!

Speech doesn't banish distance; it creates it. And if—

"Bitches, aren't they?" a voice said softly. I opened my eyes. Suky stood close to my bench. She was taller than I'd thought, with a spectacular figure. No one would ever notice, not next to the wonder and novelty of the twins.

In my shamed confusion, I blurted out the first thing that came into my mind. "Belinda is, Bridget isn't."

"That's what you think." Suky laughed, then laid her comic book on the bench. "You need this, dwarf." She vanished into some inner corridor.

I picked up the comic. It was holo, those not-inexpensive e-graphics with chips embedded in the paper. Four panels succeeded each other on each page, with every panel dramatizing the plot in ten-second bursts of shifting light. The title was "Knife Hack," and the story seemed to concern a mother who carves up her infants with a maximum amount of blood and brain spatter.

Arlen's Syndrome kids: a joy to live with, sensitive and cooperative and grateful and aware.

Just one big happy family.

But sometimes the universe gives you a break. The next day I had a cold. Nothing serious, just a stuffy nose and sore throat, but I sounded like a rusty file scraping on cast iron, so I called in sick to my "office" at Jane's estate. Her trainer answered. "*What?*"

"Tell Jane I won't be in today. Sick. And remind her to—"

"I'm not your errand boy, Barry," he answered hotly. We stared at each other's comlink images in mutual dislike. Dino Carrano was the trainer-to-the-stars-of-the-moment-before-this-one, an arrogant narcissist who three times a week tortured Jane into perfect abs and weeping exhaustion. Like Ishmael, he was without the prescience to realize that his brief vogue had passed and that Jane kept him on partly from compassion. He stood now in her deserted exercise room.

"Why are you answering the phone? Where's Catalina?"

"Her grandmother in Mexico died. Again. And before you ask, José is supervising the grounds crew and Jane is in the bathroom, throwing up. Now you know everything. Bye, Barry."

"Wait! If she's throwing up because you pushed her too hard again, you Dago bastard—"

"Save your invective, little man. We haven't even started the training session yet, and if we don't train by tomorrow, her ass is going to drop like a duffel bag. For today she just ate something bad." He cut the link.

My stomach didn't feel too steady, either. Had it been the Barrington lemonade? I made it to the bathroom just in time. But afterward I felt better, decided not to call my doctor, and went to bed. If Jane was sick, Catalina would cancel her appointments. No, Catalina was in Mexico . . . *not my problem.*

But all Jane's problems were mine. Without her, I had my own problems—Leila, Ethan—but no actual life.

Nonetheless, I forced myself to stay in bed, and eventually I fell asleep. When I woke, six hours later, my throat and stomach both felt fine. A quick call discovered that Catalina had returned from Mexico, sounding suspiciously unbereaved. But she was efficient enough when she was actually in the country, and I decided I didn't need to brief Jane on tomorrow's schedule. That would buy me one more day. I would take a relaxing evening. A long bath, a glass of wine, another postponement of talking to Leila. The industry news on *Hollywood Watch*.

The local news came on first. Ishmael's body had been found in a pond in the Valley.

". . . and weighted with cement blocks. Cause of death was a single gunshot wound to the head, execution style," said the news avatar, a CGI who looked completely real except that she had no faulty camera angles whatsoever. I stared at the photo of Ishmael's handsome face on the screen beside her. "Apparently the murderers were unaware that construction work would start today at the pond site, where luxury condos will be built by—"

Ishmael's name was Harold Sylvester Ehrenreich. Failed actor, minor grifter, petty tax evader, who had dropped out of electronic sight eight months ago.

"Anyone having any information concerning—"

I was already on the comlink. "Jane?"

"I just called the cops. They're on their way over." She looked tired, drawn, within five years of her actual age. Her voice sounded as raspy as mine had been. "I was just about to call you. Barry, if this endangers the picture—"

"It won't," I said. Thirty years a star, and she still didn't understand how the behind-the-scenes worked. "It will *make* the picture. Did you call Everett?"

"He's on his way."

"Don't say a word until both he and I get there. Not a word, Jane, not one. Can you send the flyer for me?"

"Yes. Barry—was he killed because of my interview?"

"There's no way to know that," I said, and all at once was profoundly grateful that it was true. I didn't care if Ishmael was alive, dead, or fucking himself on Mars, but Jane was built differently. People mattered to her, especially the wounded-bird type. It was how she'd ended up married to three of her four husbands and the fourth, the Alpha-Male Producer, had been in reaction to the second, the alcoholic failed actor. Catalina, Jane's housekeeper and social secretary, was another of her wounded birds. So, in his own perverse way, was her trainer.

Maybe that was why Jane had ended up with me as well.

But I could tell that neither me nor Belinda's cruel words were on Jane's mind just now. It was all Ishmael, and that was good. Ishmael would get us safely past our personal crisis. Even murder has its silver lining.

As the flyer set down on Jane's roof, I saw the media already starting to converge. Someone must have tipped them off, perhaps a clerk at the precinct. An unmarked car was parked within Jane's gates, with two vans outside and another flyer approaching from LA. Catalina let me in, her dark eyes wide with excitement. "*La policia*—"

"I know. Is Everett Murphy here?"

"Yes, he—"

"Bring in coffee and cake. And make the maids draw all the curtains in the house, *immediately*. Even the bedrooms. There'll be robocams." I wanted pictures and information released on my schedule, not that of flying recorders.

A man and a woman sat with Jane and Everett at one end of her enormous living room, which the decorator had done in swooping black curves with accents of screaming purple. The room looked nothing like Jane, who used it only for parties. She'd actually defied the decorator, who was a Dino-Carrano-bully type but not a wounded bird, and done her private sitting room in English country house. But she hadn't taken the detectives there. I could guess why: she was protecting her safe haven. Catalina rushed past me like a small Mexican tornado and dramatically pushed the button to opaque the windows. They went deep purple, and lights flickered on in the room. Catalina raced out.

"Barry," Jane said. She looked even worse than on comlink, red nose and swollen eyes and no make-up. I hoped to hell that neither cop was optic wired. "This is Detective Lopez and Detective Miller from the LAPD. Officers, my manager Barry Tenler."

They nodded. Both were too well-trained to show curiosity or distaste, but they were there. I always know. In her sitting room Jane kept a low chair for me, but here I had to scramble up onto a high black sofa that satisfied the decorator desire for "an important piece." I said, "You can question Miss Snow now, but please be advised that she has already spoken with the FBI and HPA, and that both Mr. Murphy and I reserve the right to advise her not to answer."

The cops ignored this meaningless window dressing. But I'd accomplished what I wanted. Dwarfs learn early that straightforward, multisyllabic, take-no-shit talk will sometimes stop average-sizers from treating us like children. Sometimes.

Officer Lopez began a thorough interrogation: How had she arranged the meeting with the Group? When? What contact had she had between the initial one and the meeting? Who had taken her to the meeting? Who else had accompanied her? When they found out that it had been me, Lopez got the look of a man who knows he's screwed up. "*You* were there, Mr. Tenler?"

"I was."

"You'll have to go with Officer Miller into another room," Lopez said. He stared at me hard. Witnesses were always questioned separately, and even if it hadn't crossed his mind that someone like me was a witness, he suspected it had crossed mine. Which it had. If law-enforcement agencies weren't given to so many turf wars, the LAPD would already know I'd been in that grimy basement. Or if Lopez hadn't fallen victim to his own macho assumptions. *You? She took a lame half-pint like* you *to protect her?*

"Everett is my lawyer, too," I said.

"You go with Officer Miller. Mr. Murphy will join you when I'm finished with Miss Snow." Lopez's formality barely restrained his anger.

Following Officer Miller to the media room, it occurred to me—pointlessly—that Belinda would have known immediately that I'd been withholding something.

It seemed obvious to me, as it probably was to the cops, that Ishmael had been killed by the Group. Narcissistic, bombastic, unreliable, he must have screwed up royally. Was Ms. Resentful dead, too? The bodyguard with the assault rifle? The boy who'd guided us through the warehouse?

The Group was trying to combine idealism, profit-making, and iron control. That combination never worked. I would say that to Officer Lopez, except that there was little chance he would take it seriously. Not from me.

The media spent a breathless three or four days on the story ("Famous Actress Questioned About Genemod Murder! What Does Jane Know?"). Then a United States senator married a former porn star named Candy Alley and the press moved on, partly because it was clear that Jane didn't know anything. I'd positioned her as cooperative, concerned, committed to her art, and bewildered by the killing. Opinion polls said the public viewed her favorably. She increased her name recognition 600 percent among eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds, most of whom watched only holos and had never seen a Jane Snow picture. Publicity is publicity.

She got even more of it by spending so much time with the Barrington twins. Everybody liked this except me. Frieda liked the press attention (at least, such press as wasn't staking out the senator and his new pork barrel). The twins liked Jane. She liked caring for yet more wounded birds, which was what she considered them. Her thinking on this escaped me; these were two of the most pampered children in the known universe. But Jane was only filling time, anyway, until the script was finished. And to her credit, she turned down the party invitations from the I'm-more-important-than-you A-list crowd that had ignored her for a decade. I'd urged her to turn down social invitations in order to create that important aura of non-attainable exclusivity. Jane turned them down because she no longer considered those people to be friends.

As for me, I worked at home on the hundreds of pre-photography details. Before I could finally reach Leila, she called me.

"Hey, Barry."

"Hey, Leila." She didn't look good. I steeled myself to ask. "How is he?"

"Gone again." Exhaustion pulled at her face. "I called the LAPD but they won't do anything."

"He'll come home," I said. "He always does."

"Yeah, and one of these days it'll be in a coffin."

I said nothing to that, because there was nothing to say.

Leila, however, could always find something. "Well, if he does come home in a coffin, then you'll be off the hook, won't you? No more risk of embarrassing you or the gorgeous has-been."

"Leila—"

"Have a good time with your big shot Hollywood friends. I'll just wait to hear if this time the son you deformed really is dead."

She hung up on me.

Leila and I met at a Little People of America convention in Denver. She was one of the teenage dwarfs dancing joyously, midriff bared and short skirt flipping, at the annual ball. I thought she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen: red hair and blue eyes, alive to her fingertips. I was eighteen years older than she, and everyone at the convention knew who I was. High-ranking aide to a candidate for the mayor of San Francisco. Smart, successful, sharply dressed. Local dwarf makes good. More mobile then, I asked her to dance. Six months later we married. Six months after that, while I was running the campaign for a gubernatorial candidate, Leila accidentally got pregnant.

Two dwarfs have a 25 percent chance of conceiving an average-sized child, a 50 percent chance of a dwarf, and a 25 percent of a double-dominant, which always dies shortly after birth. Leila and I had never discussed these odds because, like most dwarfs, we planned on the *in vitro* fertilization that permits cherry-picking embryos. But Leila got careless with her pills. She knew immediately that she was pregnant, and even before the zygote had implanted itself in her uterus wall, testing showed that the fetus had a "normal" FGFR3 gene. I panicked.

"I don't want to have an average-sized kid," I told Leila. "I just *don't*."

"And I don't want to have an abortion," Leila said. "It's not that I'm politically opposed to abortion. I'm glad to have the choice, but . . . Barry, I . . . I just can't. He's already a baby to me. Our baby. Why would having an Average be so hard?"

"Why?" I'd waved a hand around our house, in which everything—furniture, appliance controls, doorknobs—had been built to our scale. "Just look around! Besides, there's a moral question here, Leila. You know that with *in vitro,* fewer and fewer dwarfs are having dwarf children. That just reinforces the idea that there's something wrong with being a dwarf. I don't want to perpetuate that—I won't perpetuate that. This is a political issue! I want a dwarf child."

She believed me. She was twenty to my thirty-nine, and I was a big-shot politico. She loved me. Leila lacked the perspicacity to see how terrified I was of an average-sized son, who would be as tall as I was by the time he was seven. Who would be impossible to control. Who might eventually despise me and his mother both. But Leila really, really didn't want to abort. I talked her into *in utero* somatic gene therapy in England.

In those days I believed in science. The som-gene technique was new but producing spectacular results. The British had gotten behind genetic engineering in a big way, and knowledgeable people from all over the world flocked to Cambridge, where private firms tied to the great university were turning genes on and off in fetuses still in the womb. This had to be done during the first week or ten days after conception. The FGFR3 gene stops bones from growing. It was turned on in babies with dwarfism; a corrective genemod retrovirus should be able to turn the gene off in the

little mass of cells that was Ethan. The problem was that the Cambridge biotech clinic wouldn't do it.

"We cure disease, not cause it," I was told icily.

"Dwarfism is not a disease!" I said, too angry to be icy. Waving high the banner of political righteousness. It wasn't a good idea, in those days, to cross me. I was the high-ranking, infallible campaign guru, the tiny *wunderkind*, the man who was never wrong. Fear can present itself as arrogance.

"Nonetheless," the scientist told me in that aloof British accent, "we will not do it. Nor, I suspect, will any clinic in the United Kingdom."

He was right. Time was running out. The next day we went off-shore, to a clinic in the Caymans, and something went wrong. The retrovirus that was the delivery vector mutated, or the splicing caused other genes to jump (they will do that), or maybe God just wanted an evil joke that day. The soma-gene correction spawned side effects, with one gene turning on another that in turn affected another, a cascade of creation run amok. And we got Ethan.

Leila never forgave me, and I never forgave myself. She left me when Ethan was not quite two. I sent money. I tried to stay in touch. I bore Leila's fury and contempt and despair. She sent me pictures of Ethan, but she wouldn't let me see him. I could have pressed visitation through the courts. I didn't.

My gubernatorial candidate lost.

"Barry," Jane comlinked me the night before the first script conference, "would you like to come to dinner tonight?"

"Can't," I lied. "I already have dinner plans."

"Oh? With whom?"

"A friend." I smiled mysteriously. Some inane, back-in-high-school part of my brain hoped that she'd think I had a date. Then I saw Bridget Barrington scamper across the room behind Jane. "Are those kids at your place?"

"Yes, I couldn't go there today because Catalina is sick and I had to—"

"Sick? With what? Jane, you can't catch anything now, the first reading is tomorrow and—"

"I won't catch this—*I* gave it to *her*. It's that sore-throat-and-stomach thing we both had. Catalina—"

"You're not a goddamn nurse! If Catalina is ill—" give me credit, I didn't say *actually ill instead of faking the way she fakes relatives' deaths every fifteen minutes*"—then hire a nurse or—"

"She's not sick enough for a nurse, she just needs coddling and orange juice and company. It's fine, Barry, so butt out. I'm actually glad of the distraction, it keeps me from thinking about tonight. Oh, I meant to tell you—I talked Robert into couriering the script to me! I wanted to read it before tomorrow. He sounded weird about it, but he agreed."

My radar turned on. "Weird how?"

"I don't know. Just weird."

I considered all the possible "weirds" that the producer could be conveying, but I didn't see what I could do about any of them. I settled for, "Just don't catch anything from Catalina."

"I already *told* you that I won't."

"Fine. Whatever you say."

And it *was* fine. She was treating me the way she always did, with exasperated affection, and I was grateful. Belinda's poison, flushed out of our working relationship by the flood of feeling about Ishmael's murder, hadn't harmed us. I wouldn't lose the little of Jane that I had.

And the picture was going to be a blockbuster.

"It's a disaster!" Jane screamed. "I won't do it!"

Sitting up in bed, I stared blearily at the wall screen. Beneath the image of Jane's ravaged face, the time said 12:56 AM. I struggled to assemble consciousness.

"What is—"

She started to cry, great gasping sobs that would wreck her face for tomorrow's conference. When had I seen Jane cry like that? When the last husband left. And the one before that.

"I'm coming right over," I said. "I'm leaving immediately. Don't read any more of the script. We'll work this out, I promise."

She was sobbing too hard to answer me.

"Just have a glass of wine and wait for me."

"O . . . okay."

I cut the link and called my chauffeur. I can drive if I have to, but it's painful. Ernie and his wife Sandra, my housekeeper, live in the guest cottage. They're both achons. "Mr. Tenler? What is it? Are you okay?" Ernie sounded bewildered. They're good people, but I've kept our relationship distant, not given to midnight calls for chauffeur service.

"I'm fine, but I have to go to Miss Snow's immediately. Can you bring around the car in five minutes?"

"Five minutes?" Ernie's face looked exhausted. "Yeah, sure."

"Are *you* all right?"

Surprise replaced his exhaustion. I wasn't in the habit of asking after Ernie's health.

"Yeah, I'm fine, it's just that Sandra and I have both been under the weather. But no big deal. I'll be there in—"

"But if you're sick, maybe you shouldn't—"

"Five minutes," Ernie said, and now suspicion had replaced surprise. What the hell was I doing? I didn't know, either. Painfully I climbed from the bed, tried to flex my aching body, and pulled on clothes. I hobbled out the front door as the Lexus pulled up.

"Here," I said, handing Ernie a pain patch and a plastiflask of orange juice. He stared at me and shook his head.

Jane, in robe and slippers, let me in herself. Her face, red and blotchy and swollen, looked the worst I'd ever seen it. I wanted to take her in my arms, and that turned my voice harsher than I expected. "What's wrong with the fucking script?"

Perversely, my anger seemed to steady her. "It's a travesty."

"Did they reduce your part?"

"That's the least of it! Read it, Barry. I want you to read it for yourself." She led the way to her sitting room. A bottle of wine, half empty, sat on the table. Jane poured herself a third glass as I read, but I wasn't worried about that. Despite her fragile looks, Jane could out-drink a Russian stevedore.

I began to read.

Future Perfect was based on a short story by an obscure writer, which means the studio got the rights cheap. Like much fiction set in the future, it extrapolated from the present, portraying a Mississippi city in which the mayor was an Arlen's Syndrome young woman named Kate Bradshaw. Kate, empathetic but inexperienced, was guided by Jane's character, an ex-DA who was tough, funny, and not above using her mature sexuality for political ends. The story arc brought in prejudice, female friendship, and the choices that politics must make to accommodate radically different points of view. There was a lot of lush Deep South atmosphere. The ending, deliberately ambiguous, featured a knock-out closing speech for Jane's DA.

The script had moved the story to LA. The mayor was an evil Delilah who could read minds. She seduced and destroyed men, subverted democracy, had her enemies tortured. Clones were created. Buildings blew up, many buildings. Jane's character was also blown up, a third of the way into the movie. The mayor is eventually shot through the heart by a noble young HPA agent. The body bleeds viscous yellow blood.

"Jane," I said, and stopped. I had to be careful, had to choose just the right words. She had finished off the bottle of wine. I brought her a box of tissues, even though she had stopped crying. "I know it's bad, but—"

"I won't do it." Her flexible voice held the kind of despair that's gone past raging, gone straight into hopelessness.

"This is only the first pass at the script. We can ask for—"

"You know we won't get it."

I did know. I went to the main point. "Janie, sweetheart, this is the only project you've been offered in—"

"I won't do it."

"Jane, you're not—"

"I should think *you* would understand," she said, looking at me directly with a very un-Jane look. No softness, no flirtation, nothing but quiet, unvarnished truth. "This piece of shit encourages hatred. Not just portrays it, but actively encourages it. Arlen's kids are different, therefore they must be bad, evil. More than that—they're the result of a genetic difference, so they must be really bad, really evil, and we should clean them out of our society. I should think you, of all people, Barry, would object to that."

We had never, not once in five years, discussed my dwarfism. She didn't know about Leila, about Ethan. This was uncharted territory for us, and with every cell of my being I did *not want to go there*. She had no right to bring this home to me; it was her decision. Anger hijacked my brain.

"You have no idea what I should or should not object to! Do you think that two weeks spent with a few genetically privileged kids gives you insight into what genetics can do? You know nothing, you're as ignorant and stupid as most of the rest of the so-called 'normal' population. You have no *idea* the anguish that fucking genemods can cause, you think they're all uplifting improvements to mankind, you think that you can just . . . Go ahead, commit career suicide! This script is all you've been offered in three years, and it's all you're going to get offered. You're an aging actress who belongs to another era, a Norma Desmond who will never . . . go ahead, tell yourself you're taking the moral high ground! You're standing on quicksand, and I'll be fucked if I let you take me down with you!"

Silence.

She said wearily, "I won't do this script."

"Fine. Get yourself another manager."

I hobbled out to the waiting car and Ernie drove me home.

Jane withdrew from the picture. The studio cast Suri Cruise in the part; she was young enough to be Jane's daughter. Leila called to say tersely that Ethan had crawled home from his latest bout of homelessness. He had a broken nose, a black eye, and a mangled hand. She wouldn't let me come to see him: "How would he even know who the fuck you are?" I didn't insist. The LAPD announced periodically that there were no new developments in the Harold Ehrenreich murder case, and over the next few months, Ishmael's handsome face disappeared from the newsgrids.

Ernie recovered from his bout of flu in a few days, but Sandra's turned into pneumonia and she had to go to the hospital. I visited her every day, to her bewilderment. This was new behavior, but I knew the cause. I had nothing else to do, or at least

nothing I could make myself do, and hospital visiting was a distraction. Sandra was only there for four days, but her roommate developed complications and had to go into ICU. She was a frightened old woman with no family. I brought her flowers and chocolate and, when she was a little better, played mah-jongg with her. The game attracted a few other invalids, including a young man dying of one of the few cancers that medicine still couldn't cure. I began visiting him, too. Martin never seemed to even notice that I was a dwarf. Perhaps, as someone once remarked, dying does concentrate the mind, squeezing out everything else.

Every once in a while I reflected wryly that I seemed to have taken on Jane's penchant for wounded birds. But I didn't reflect too hard; hospital visiting was a long way from Hollywood management, which in turn was a long way from the nails-tough political world. I didn't want to look at how far I'd fallen.

Jane, too, seemed to be in wounded-bird mode. Sometimes, not too often, a picture of her would turn up on some fourth-rate "celebrity watch" linksite, the holo supplied by a desperate paparazzo who couldn't do better. In those shots, she was helping some homeless drunk or paying the bills for a child who owned one ragged dress, or so it was claimed. The holos of Jane with the Barrington twins, on the other hand, turned up regularly on all the news vectors. Frieda Barrington probably saw to that.

In July, Ernie and Sandra quit. "I'm sorry, Mr. Tenler, but we're not comfortable here any more."

"Not comfortable?" I had just spent twenty thousand dollars remodeling the guest cottage.

"No." He shifted from one foot to the other. Ernie has a smaller head and butt than a lot of achons, but he's far from being a proportional, and another job that paid this well for this little work was not going to be easy to find. Not for him, not for Sandra. Where would they go?

"Where will you go?"

"That's our business."

It was such a rude answer that I frowned. Something in the frown broke his reserve.

"Look, Mr. Tenler, it's not that we aren't grateful. You done a lot for us. But lately you're so . . . we didn't want the cottage remodeled, and I said as much to you. You keep *giving* us things we don't want. And . . . and hanging around a lot. I'm sorry, but it's a huge pain in the ass."

And I had just wanted to help!

But now Ernie was wound up. "It's like you're trying to control us. I know, I know, you think you're being a good guy, but we . . . and those calls! They're creeping out Sandra. It's best that we go."

I gave them a generous severance pay-out and hired a Mexican couple, undocumented, who desperately needed jobs. It felt good to help them along. The comlink calls, I started taking myself.

They came once or twice a week. No visual, and the audio came through a voice changer. Routing was via a private, encrypted satellite system, so there was no chance whatsoever of tracing the calls. I thought at first that they might be from Jane, but this emphatically was not her style. Each call was exactly the same:

"Barry Tenler."

"I'm Barry Tenler."

Heavy breathing. Finally, "I know how you feel."

"Feel about what?"

And now the mechanical voice—this isn't supposed to be possible, but I swear I heard it—hinted at pain. "I just want you to know that someone understands. Someone in the same position."

"Look, let me help—" And the link ended.

What "position"? Another dwarf? Another unemployed PR-flack-cum-manager? Another parent of a kid with major genetic problems?

Then I had another mystery because the feds showed up. They proved to be just as elusive as my unknown caller.

"We'd like to ask you some questions, Mr. Tenler."

"What about? Do I need my lawyer?"

"No, not at all. These are just general questions, in the public interest. You'd really help us out."

I blinked. The HPA usually commands "help" rather than requests it, and these were not the erection-jawed types who'd interviewed me after Jane's and my visit to the Group. These two, a man and a woman, were both short, slightly built, mild in manner, deliberately unthreatening. Why? I was curious. Also bored, so I asked them in. Or maybe it was just to see them both perch uncomfortably on my dwarf-sized living room chairs, their knees rising above the cocktail table like cliff faces from a Himalayan valley.

"Have you been ill lately, Mr. Tenler?"

"Ill? No. I'm fine." I knew they weren't referring to chronic pain. Nor to chronic self-pity, either.

"No flu-like symptoms?"

"I did have the flu a few months ago, but nothing since."

I could sense the two of them not looking at each other.

"What is this about?" I asked. "I think I'd like to know before I answer any more questions."

"I wish we could accommodate you, sir," the woman said apologetically. She was maybe five-one, pretty, and when she smiled at me, I felt anger swell in my chest. A cheap tactic if there ever was one. *Maybe he'll talk to a woman on his own level . . .* "Just one more question, please. It would really help us out. Since March, has anyone from the Group tried to contact you?"

"No." If the encrypted calls were from the Group, I didn't know it, and the feds weren't going to, either.

"Thank you, Mr. Tenler," she said winningly, and handed me her card. Agent Elaine Brown, Human Protection Agency.

"Once again, what is this *about*?"

"Please contact us if anything occurs to you, or if you're contacted by the Group," the male agent said. "There's been chatter among our informants."

I knew better than to ask what kind of chatter; he'd probably said too much anyway. After they left, I stared at Elaine Brown's card, wondering what the hell that had all been about.

Two weeks later, I found out. The whole world found out, but I was first.

Another post-midnight phone call, and this time I was not in the mood for it. I'd spent the day at the hospital. Martin, my mah-jongg playing cancer patient, died at 4:43 PM. The only other person there was his elderly mother, who then fell apart. I had done for her what I could, which wasn't much, arriving home late at night. Three whisky-and-sodas hadn't dulled my sense that the world made no sense. The bedside clock said 2:14 AM. I snarled at the screen, "*What*?"

"Barry Tenler." It wasn't a question. The screen stayed dark.

"Look, I'm not in the mood for games tonight, so you can just—" Then it hit me that the voice was not mechanical, not masked. A woman's voice, and somewhere I'd heard it before.

"Listen to me, this is a matter of life and death for someone you love. Get Jane Snow away to someplace safe and hidden, and do it *now*. Tonight."

"What the—who are you?"

"It doesn't matter who I am. Get her away tonight."

"Why? What's going to—no, don't hang up! You're—"

Where had I heard that voice?

"Just go. Good-bye."

I had it. "You're the woman from the Group." In the warehouse basement. *To date, three thousand two hundred fourteen.* The only sentence I'd heard her utter, and not even a whole sentence. A fragment.

Silence.

"And," I said, as it all came together in my sleep-deprived brain, "you're the woman who's been making those masked calls to me." *I know how you feel . . . I just want you to know that someone understands. Someone in the same position.* "You loved Ishmael."

"They murdered him!" A second later she'd regained control of herself. That a woman like this lost control at all was a measure of her pain. Grief can drive even the toughest person to acts of insanity. Maybe especially the toughest person. She said, "I underestimated you."

I didn't say *People usually do*, because now fear had my chest gripped tight. She was credible, at least to me. "How is Jane in danger? Please tell me."

A long pause, and then she said, "Why the fuck not? But know one thing, Barry Tenler. You will never find me, and neither will the Group. And tomorrow morning it will all be public anyway. Tell me, have you ever heard of oxytorin?"

"No."

"Did you get ill a few days after your little visit in March to that warehouse?"

The fear gripped harder. "Flu-like symp—"

"It wasn't flu. Tell me, have you noticed yourself engaged in unusual behaviors lately? Has Jane? Has anyone else with whom you've exchanged bodily fluids, especially saliva?"

I hadn't exchanged bodily fluids, including saliva, with anyone. But all at once I remembered the pre-meeting searches in the warehouse. A man had checked me over, including opening my mouth and moving aside my tongue. His hands had felt unpleasantly slimy.

I was having trouble breathing. "What . . . what is oxytorin?"

"Nothing that will kill you. The Group is made up of idealists, remember? Idealists who murder anyone who wanders two inches off the reservation." She laughed, a horrible sound. "I know he was dumb and vain, but I loved him. Sneer at that if you will, only you won't, will you? Not you. You're just as enslaved by another beautiful moron. And you can't help it any more than I could, can you?"

"Please . . . what is oxytorin?"

Her tone lost its anguished cynicism. Relaying factual information steadied her.

"It's a neuropeptide, a close relative to oxytocin, secreted in the brain and the pituitary gland. Like oxytocin, it has effects on social behavior. Specifically, it promotes nurturing behavior. If you give it to virgin female rats, within forty-eight hours they're building nests and trying to nurse any baby rats you hand to them. If you remove it from mother rats' brains, they ignore their babies and let them die. The same with monkeys. It—"

Nurturing behavior. Bringing Ernie and Sandra orange juice and remodeling their cottage. Visiting hospital patients whom I met by accident. Jane, childless, spending hours and hours with the Barrington twins.

"—has been synthesized synthetically for a long time, but the synthetic version has to be injected directly into the brain. That's not practical when you want to permanently influence a large fraction of the population, so instead—"

"You bastards." It came out a whisper, strangled by rage.

"—the Group went with a compound that switches on the genes that create oxytorin receptors. You don't have more oxytorin, you just have more receptors for it, so more of it is actually affecting your brain. Although susceptibility to the genemod will vary among people—like, say, susceptibility to cholera depends on blood type. The delivery vector is a retrovirus, capable of penetrating the blood-brain barrier, but which first colonizes mouth and nose secretions. The—"

"You used us. Me and Jane. You—"

"—desired end here is a kinder, gentler populace. Isn't that what we all want?"

The combination of cynicism and idealism in her words stunned me, because I knew it was absolutely genuine. Again, a whisper: "You can't."

"We did. And if the fucking leadership had ever taken it themselves, before they decided Harold was a liability—" She was sobbing. I didn't care.

My throat opened up. I screamed, "You can't just fuck around with people's genes without their consent!"

The sobbing stopped. She said coldly, "Why not? You did."

She knew. They knew. About Ethan.

"I'm telling you this because tomorrow morning the Group is putting the story on the Link. You and your ageing Aphrodite are carriers, and when the press gets hold of that, you'll be inundated, if not lynched. Especially since the Group is saying that Jane Snow cooperated, that this is part of her Hollywood liberal-left politics. Plenty will believe it. And even if they don't, sensationalism always works best when pegged to a few identifiable people. *You* should know that."

"Why are you telling—"

"You don't listen, do you? I already told you why. You're just as fucked as I am. We're alike, you and I, and neither of us ever stood a fucking chance of getting who we wanted. Damn them to hell, all of them . . . It always comes down to bodies, Munchkin, and yours has been damned twice. So get yourself and her out of town. Now." The link broke.

I stood staring at nothing for a full minute, for a lifetime. I wasn't even aware of the body she had just mocked. Only my mind raced.

Bodily fluids. Blood, semen, saliva. Jane wiping snot from the noses of the Barrington twins, kissing them, kissing half of the Hollywood press corps in their touch-touch social rituals. And . . . sleeping with someone? I never asked her. And undoubtedly we weren't the only two that had been infected; that wouldn't be widespread enough. We were just the two that were going to be publicly named.

The weakness of the Group's expensive, individually created genemods for Arlen's Syndrome had always been the very small number of empathic kids it could create. When Jane had pointed this out, Ishmael had gone into his grandiose "ripple" analogy, which explained nothing. But somewhere above Ishmael were people far more knowledgeable, more committed, more dangerous. People with a plan, a revolution for society. The Group had been waging war with the genomes of children as bullets. Now they had moved up to soma-gene engineering, as saturation bombing.

Anger is a great heartener. I dressed quickly, put a few things in a bag, and went down to the car. The kind of encryption that my caller had used was not available to me, and so the comlink was too big a risk. The pedal extenders that Ernie had used in the Lexus, and which Carlos didn't need, were still in the trunk. I installed them and drove to Jane's. I have e-codes to the gate and the house. Within an hour I was at her bedroom door.

What if she wasn't alone?

Deep breath. I went in. "Jane? Don't scream, it's Barry."

"*What*—"

"It's Barry. I'm turning on the light."

She sat up in bed, wild-eyed, and she wasn't alone. The Barrington twins curled up on the other side of the huge bed, lost in the heavy sleep of childhood, their hair in tangles and drool on their pillows. "*What the fuck—*"

All at once my legs gave way. I grasped the edge of the mattress, lowered myself to the floor, and so once again had to look up at her. "Listen, Janie, this is life-and-death. We have to leave here. Now. No, don't say anything—just listen to me for once!"

Something in my voice, or my ridiculous position, got through to her. She didn't say a word as I told her everything that I'd been told. Her feathery light hair drifted in some air current from the open window, and above the modest blue pajamas she wore for this grandmotherly sleep-over, her neck and face turned mottled red, and then dead white. When I finished, I heaved myself to my feet.

"Pack a bag. Five minutes."

And then she spoke. "I can't leave the twins."

I stared at her.

"I can't, Barry. Frieda and John are in Europe, so the are kids staying with me this week, and anyway won't they be in danger, too? I must have infected them by now . . . *saliva . . .*"

"Catalina will look after them!"

"She's in Mexico. Her aunt died."

I closed my eyes. I knew that look of Jane's. "No," I said.

"I have to! And Frieda would want me to—God, they already get death threats every day! When it's public that they can infect others—"

Nurturing behavior. Virgin rats trying to nurse any baby rats you hand to them.

I said, "It's kidnapping."

"It's not. I'll email Frieda."

One of the girls woke up. She gazed at us from wide, frightened eyes. It was Bridget, the Glinda of the witchy pair. She said in a quavery voice, "Don't leave us, Jane!"

"I won't, darling. I wouldn't."

She looked so small, and so frightened . . . Then I caught myself. *Oxytorin*. I barked, "No electronics that can be traced. Not phones, not mobiles, not games, not anything. Do those kids have subdermal ID chips?"

"No," Jane said. I could see that she wanted to say more, much more, but not in front of Bridget.

Fifteen minutes later, after Jane sent a hasty email to Frieda and John Barrington, we drove out the estate gates, heading toward the mountains.

When Leila was one month pregnant, the ultrasound looked like any other baby. The same at two, five, and nine months. All fetuses have oversized heads, spindly little arms and legs. When Ethan was born, there was no way to tell he was a dwarf, except by another genescan. Eighty-five percent of dwarfs are born to average-sized parents, the result not of carrying the dominant gene but of a mutation during conception. Usually the parents don't even realize the child will be a dwarf until the baby fails to grow like other children.

But we, of course, knew. Ethan would be a dwarf. We engineered him to be a dwarf. Then he was born and scanned.

A twentieth century religious writer once said that humanity needs the disabled to remind us of the fragility of health, and of "the power of life and its brokenness." The nineteenth century mother of the famous Colonel Tom Thumb attributed her son's dwarfism to her grief over the death of the family dog during her pregnancy. Leila and I had no such spiritual consolations, no such explanations for Ethan's lack of dwarfism. The ones that science could offer were vague: Engineering fails. Genes jump. Chromosomes mutate. Accidents happen. Nature asserts herself.

I bought the mountain cabin just after Leila left me. I think now that I wasn't quite sane during that awful time. I'd retired from politics and hadn't yet entered show-business management. I had nothing to do. There are notebooks I wrote then in which I talk about suicide, but I have no memory of doing the writing or thinking the thoughts. Eventually, that time passed. I left the cabin and never went back. Years later I deeded it over to Leila, who would go there sometimes with Ethan when he was small. She told me once, in a rare lapse into civility, that Ethan was happy at the cabin. He chased butterflies, hunted rocks, picked wildflowers. He calmed down up there, and he slept well in the sweet mountain air.

Now the twins did the same, falling asleep on the back seat of the Lexus. Still Jane and I didn't talk. But once she put her hand on the back of my neck. That was a gesture I'd dreamed about, longed for, would have given ten years of my life for. But not like this. Her touch wasn't sexual, wasn't romantic.

It was motherly.

We pulled up to the cabin just as the sun rose over the mountains, an hour before the Group was scheduled to break its story. Jane's skin goose-fleshed as she opened the car door and the cold dawn air rushed in.

"I'm going to carry them inside," she said, the first words she'd spoken in an hour. "They need their sleep. Is the door locked?"

"I have the key."

Mundane words, normal words. While below us, the human race was about to be altered at its core.

The cabin, too, was cold. I started the generator—quicker than building a fire—while Jane, puffing a little, carried the girls one at a time into the bedroom. The cabin is small but it's not primitive or austere; I'm not a fan of either. It has a main room with running water from a deep well, a comfortable bedroom, and a bathroom with full septic system. The original furniture had been sized for me, but evidently Leila had replaced it all. The sofa was hard to climb onto. My legs hurt.

Jane emerged from the bedroom after depositing the last twin, closed the door, and sat down on a wing chair across from me. She said quietly, "You could have let me drive."

I didn't answer.

"Is there a radio here?"

"There was. A satellite radio—the mountains don't permit much other reception."

"Where is it?"

"I don't know. I haven't been here for a long time."

She got up and began opening cupboards in the kitchenette. The counters and appliances, like the furniture, had been replaced, but no new cabinets built above them. Jane had to squat to peer into shelves. She searched the two closets, one of which had not existed when I'd owned the cabin, then sat down again. "No radio. But a lot of food and equipment. Who uses this place?"

Again I didn't answer.

"Barry, what's our plan?"

I looked at her then. No make-up, barely combed hair, huddled inside jeans and a green sweater that matched her eyes. She had never looked more beautiful to me.

"My only plan was to get you away before some angry mob came after you. People aren't going to like that their brains have been fucked with, and you're a natural target, Jane."

"I know." She smiled wanly. "I always have been, for anybody with a grudge. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Because the perception is that you have it all." I meant: beauty, talent, success, riches. I meant: my heart.

She snorted. "Oh, right. I have a burnt-out career, four bad marriages, and wrinkles that Botox can't touch. Barry, dear, you look tired. Why don't you lie on the sofa and I'll make you some warm milk."

"Don't mother me!" It came out a snarl.

She looked startled, then angry, then compassionate. Compassionate was the worst. "I only meant—"

"That's not you talking, it's the genemod that the Group infected you with."

She turned thoughtful, considering this. Contrary to Ms. Resentful's perception, Jane was not stupid. Finally she said, "No, I don't think so, because I think I would have reacted the same way even before all this started. If I saw you tired and discouraged, I'd have offered some comfort anyway."

This was true. All at once I saw that this was going to be more complicated than I thought. How could anybody determine which behavior was caused by increased oxytorin receptors, and which was innate? It was the old argument, genes versus free will, only now it was about to turn incendiary.

Jane said, "I'm making you that warm milk."

But I was asleep before she could bring it to me.

I woke to Belinda standing beside the sofa, staring at me flatly. "I want to go home."

Groggily I sat up. Everything hurt. "Where's Jane?"

"Her and Bridget went for a stupid walk. Take me home."

"I can't. Not yet."

"*I want to go home.*"

Painfully I climbed off the sofa and headed to the kitchenette. There was fresh coffee in a Braun on the counter, but I couldn't reach it. Hating every second that Belinda watched me, I dragged a footstool from the fireplace to the counter and hoisted myself onto it. A part of my brain noticed dispassionately that I felt no nurturing impulses toward Belinda when she didn't look more helpless than I felt.

The coffee was hot and rich. Good coffee had always been important to Leila. I gulped it down and said, "How long ago did they leave on this walk?"

"I don't know."

She probably did know and wasn't telling me, the brat.

"I really don't know, so stop thinking I'm a liar."

How did she do it? I'd read the literature on Arlen's Syndrome. Subconscious processes in Belinda's malevolent little brain were hypersensitive to six non-word signals: gesture and facial expression, even very tiny movements in either. Rhythm of movement. Bodily use of space. Objectics, such as dress and hairstyle. And what was called paralanguage: tone of voice, rate of verbal delivery, emphasis, and inflection. Taken together, they let her read my emotions like a Teleprompter, but she was not reading my mind. I had to remind myself of that. Nonetheless, for the first time I saw the rationale for burning witches at the stake.

She said, "I don't care if you hate me."

"I don't hate you, Belinda." Said hopelessly; I couldn't hide from her.

"I hate you, too."

I took my coffee outside. Leila hadn't removed the low bench in front of the cabin, from which there was a breath-taking panorama of mountains and valleys, a pristine Eden that, when I'd lived here those nine months, had filled me with despair. Eden is no longer Eden if you've been exiled from it. The ghost of those bad feelings seemed to linger around the bench, but I didn't go back inside. Presently Jane and Bridget came puffing up the dirt road, Bridget clutching a mess of buttercups and daisies.

"Hi, Barry," the child said unhappily. She'd been crying. Immediately I braced my-

self and there it was: the soft desire to reassure her, help her, kiss the boo-boo and make it all better.

God damn it to hell.

Jane sat on the bench beside me. "Go put the flowers in water, Bridget."

When she'd gone, I said, "We need to know what's happening in LA. There's a library in Dunhill, at the base of the mountain. If you wrap up your hair and wear sunglasses and—oh, I don't know, *act*—do you think you can go in there unnoticed and use the Link? I know I can't."

She looked at the mountain road, which has no guard rails and, in places, pretty steep fall-offs. Jane doesn't like heights. She said, "Yes. I can do it."

"Don't stay long, and don't talk to anybody. Not one word. Your voice is memorable."

"Only if you'd heard it more recently than ten years ago. And in a better picture than my last one. Should I go now?" Again she looked at the road.

Before I could answer, the twins started shouting inside the cabin. Jane rose to her feet as the girls raced outside. Bridget cried, "Belinda, *don't*!"

Belinda said, "If you don't take us home this very minute, I'm going to tell everybody that you touched me in my private place and you'll go to jail forever and ever and ever!"

"No, you will *not*, young lady," Jane said severely. "You just come inside with me this very minute."

Belinda looked astonished. Probably Frieda had never spoken to her daughter that way. I reflected that "maternal behavior" could include discipline. Belinda followed Jane inside.

Had Frieda felt too intimidated by her daughters to reprimand them? Too proud? Too guilty? Had she been too terrified of what they might in turn say to her? I could imagine any of those scenarios, with a child so different from you, so strange, so eerily knowing.

What kind of discipline had Leila given, or not given, to Ethan?

Jane returned from Dunhill in a state of restrained anxiety. Nobody, she said, had recognized her at the library. She'd accessed the Link, watched the news, hardcopied the headlines. It was all even worse than I'd expected.

BIOWEAPON RELEASED IN CALIFORNIA

ARLEN'S WAS ONLY THE FIRST STEP—NOW THEY'RE SPREADING MUTATIONS!

ACTRESS A PART OF BIOCONSPIRACY SPREADING EPIDEMIC

CALL FOR IMMEDIATE QUARANTINE OF L.A.

RUN ON GAS MASKS, RIOTS, CAUSE DEATHS OF FOUR

MUTANTS NOW AMONG US—YOU COULD BE ONE!

JANE SNOW AND MANAGER MISSING SINCE LAST NIGHT

"They're calling it treason," Jane said.

"It is treason. Or something." Bioweapon terrorism. Invasion of bodily privacy. Violations of the Fourteenth Amendment. Medical malpractice.

"What next, Barry?"

"I'm not sure. I need to think." But all I could think about was what might have happened if I hadn't gotten Jane away, if Ms. Resentful hadn't called me. *Riots cause death of four*. And that was without the rioters' zeroing in on a specific target.

"What did the twins do while I was gone?"

"Nothing." They'd played inside and I'd sat outside, pretending they weren't there. Jane went into the cabin.

A minute later she was back. "They're making cookies."

"Fine. Just so long as they don't burn down the cabin."

"We won't," Bridget said, and there they were beside us, having silently followed Jane. Belinda had a picturesque smudge of chocolate on her nose. I did not think that she looked adorable. Bridget added, "Why are you scared, Jane?"

Jane knew better than to deny. "I went down to a town where I could get the news, and some people in LA are very angry at another group of people there. It could get violent."

Belinda said, "But why does that mean we can't go home?"

Bridget said, "They're mad at us, too, aren't they? You're scared for us. Why? We didn't do anything!"

Belinda said, "Don't be stupid, Brid. People get mad at us all the time when we didn't do anything." She looked at me. "Like Barry is mad at us."

Bridget scowled, making her suddenly look more like her sister. "Yeah. Why are you mad at us, Barry?"

"Because I didn't want to have to bring you here. But if I hadn't, you might both have been attacked by a mob now."

Bridget looked scared, but Belinda said, "Naw, we got really good security at home. *Nobody* can get through. I want to go home!"

"And I want you to," I said, which was nothing less than total truth—even as I felt the treacherous desire to comfort little frightened Bridget . . . *oxytorin*.

Belinda did not look frightened. She was working up to a towering tantrum. "Then take us home! Take us home now!"

Jane said soothingly, "We can't, Belinda. It's not safe. The—"

"It is safe! Daddy's estate is safe! I want to go home!"

Bridget said, with heart-breaking hopelessness, "Belinda—"

Belinda kicked her sister, who screamed and fell to the ground. Then she kicked Jane, who made a grab for her. Belinda was quicker, squirming away, tears of rage on her grimy face.

"Don't touch me! Don't you ever touch me! I hate you, you go around feeling sorry for everybody who isn't you! You feel sorry for Barry 'cause he's all twisted and short, and you feel sorry for Brid and me 'cause you think we're so different, just like you feel sorry for Catalina and the pilot and everybody who's not pretty like you! Well, you're not so pretty anymore *either*, 'cause you're old and you know it and you're scared nobody's going to like you any more if you're not pretty and if you don't do that fucking movie about us! And you know what—you're right! Nobody will like you just like I hate you! 'Cause you're old and not pretty any more and you'll be alone all the rest of your life! And—"

Jane stood still, looking dazed. Looking stripped naked. But now Bridget was up off the ground and barreling into her sister head first, a battering ram to the belly. "Don't you kick me!"

Belinda screamed and the two girls went down, rolling in the scrub grass in front of the cabin, punching and pulling hair and scratching. Jane sprang forward, trying to pull them off each other. The sound of a motor made her, and me, freeze.

And Leila's car roared into sight and jerked to a stop, with her and Ethan inside.

* * *

Empathy means you understand another's feelings. It doesn't mean you sympathize with them, or respect them. Hitler's brilliant propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, understood perfectly what the German people were feeling in the 1920s and 30s: insecurity, rage, fear, resentment at the punishments for WWI. He used that knowledge to manipulate their emotions, creating the brilliant PR campaigns that put Hitler in power and kept him there.

The Group must have realized too late that Arlen's Syndrome was not, after all, a guarantee that the world would change for the better. So they'd created the virus that increases oxytorin receptors. Correcting a genetic-engineering change with another genetic-engineering change.

I could have told them that does not work.

Ethan got out of the car first, from the passenger side. Both Bridget and Belinda stopped fighting, got up off the ground, and stared. Ethan's right eye was blackened, and his left arm was in a sling. He scowled ferociously at them, at me, at the world.

He was utterly beautiful.

Auburn hair falling over his forehead, blue eyes, a body that Michelangelo could have used as the model for his *David*. More than that, Ethan had the same quality that Jane did: an innate and unconscious sexuality so blatant that it was like a slap in the face, a challenge: *Come and get me. If you can*. His photos had not captured that quality. Bridget and Belinda were eleven years old, and yet I saw that they felt it, Bridget blushing and looking confused, Belinda scowling back, but with surprise behind her gray eyes. Jane's back was to me. Leila got out of the car and called desperately, "Ethan!"

He ignored her and kept walking. It was me he was moving toward. I stood up from my bench, my heart hammering. Ethan stopped in front of me. I came up to slightly higher than his waist.

"You're my father," he said, with utter contempt. "*You*."

Leila was running from the car, but Jane was closer. She threw herself between us just as Ethan's fist shot out, and the blow intended for my face hit her in the chest.

"I don't think any of her ribs are broken," Leila said wearily. "She said it doesn't hurt when she breathes, which is a good sign."

Leila and I sat in her car, a three-year-old Ford, each of us holding steaming mugs of fresh coffee. Mine trembled in numb fingers. Jane slept, courtesy of a pain patch, in the bedroom. The twins, subdued now, had been ordered back to their cookie-making, and had actually gone. Ethan had stalked away into the woods, and I was sickened to realize that I hoped he'd stay away. I was afraid of my son.

"Leila, I didn't realize . . . I know you'd said, but . . . Of course, behavior is a complex genetic and environmental phenomenon, and when you interfere with—"

"*Don't*. Don't go informational and theoretical on me like you always do. Just don't!"

"All right."

She turned her face to look at me. "That's the first time I think you've actually heard me when I've said that."

Maybe it was. Information and theory were good hiding places. "And Ethan gets like this—"

"Unpredictably. The psychologist says he has poor impulse control. When he gets upset, there's a major neural highjacking. You've seen the brain scans with all the irregularities in his amygdalas and hippocampus. He gets swamped with rage, and sometimes he can't even remember what he's done. Not always, but sometimes."

"And you've dealt with this alone for—"

"Since he was a toddler. But you *knew* all this, Barry. I told you."

She had. But I hadn't really heard her, hadn't wanted to hear her. I'd preferred to blame her, as she blamed me.

Leila continued, "When he comes back from the woods, he'll be different. Until the next time. But now that he's old enough to run away . . . and looking like he does . . ."

She didn't have to finish the sentence. I knew what LA could be for a fifteen-year-old who looked like Ethan.

I said, "Did you two just happen to come up here today?"

"No. Jane called me."

I spilled my coffee. "Jane?"

"Yes. She did what you should have done." Now Leila's anger was back. Anger and blame. "Or didn't you bother to think that Ethan might be in danger once the witch hunt down there fingered you? Which it has, by the way, according to the car radio while I could still get reception on the way up here. Didn't you bother to think that your *son* might make a good substitute target?"

"I didn't think anyone would trace you and Ethan to me."

"Jane obviously did!"

And probably used a private detective to do it. How long ago? Why?

"I'm sorry, Leila. I didn't think you'd be in any danger. I didn't think the media—" I stopped. She knew what I meant.

However nasty the daily world is to dwarfs, there is only one Official Story about us allowed in mainstream media. That's the happytalk Big-Hearts-in-Little-Bodies slant. Dwarfs making good, doing good, being good. Thus is the daily nastiness offset and balance restored to the universe. That the media in LA had now abandoned the formula was a strong measure of how much fear the Group had engineered along with their virus.

I said, "This whole thing . . . God knows I didn't want these twins here, either."

"Where are their parents? Or are you guilty of kidnapping, along with everything else?"

Yes. No. "Their parents know the kids are here. They're on their way home from Europe."

"The Barrington twins, of all kids. God, Barry, you really can screw up royally."

Like I needed to be told that. But I pushed down my anger. This was maybe the only chance I was going to get, and I had to say it right. "Listen, Leila. I want to say something. I know I've been negligent, and I know that Ethan is . . . I know I had a lot to do with this, because of what I insisted on before he was born. But I want to say three things, and I want you to really consider them. You don't have to, but I'd really like it if you would. First, what I said before is true, even though I picked a stupid time to say it. Behavior is genetically complex, and Ethan's . . . problems, his brain irregularities, could have happened even if I hadn't insisted on the *in utero* genemod. We'll never know."

Leila made a sudden motion, but I kept on, afraid to stop. "Second, just consider—please consider!—that I tried to help with Ethan and you pushed me away. You were so angry that you . . . I don't say you weren't justified. But you *did* push me away, and left me, and refused to let me see him, and I think it's unfair that I then get blamed for not seeing him."

"I wasn't—" she said hotly. I put my hand on her arm.

"*Please*. Just one more thing. It's not too late. I want to help, want to do whatever I can, whatever you and he will let me do. If we can get past this anger at each other, finally, and cooperate, that has to be better for Ethan!"

She shook my hand off her arm, but she didn't get out of the car. We sat in silence for a few minutes. I held my breath.

Finally Leila spoke in a different voice. "I don't know if I can. I've hated you for so long . . . I think . . . I think I might *need* to hate you. In order to go on."

I knew enough to be quiet.

"Oh, God, I don't want to be that person!" Leila cried. "Barry—"

"I know," I said. "I don't want to be the person I am, either."

She blindsided me then. "Do you love her very much?"

Only honesty would do now. "Yes."

"I'm seeing somebody," Leila said. "That's part of why Ethan's so angry. He hasn't ever had to share me."

"I'm glad for you, Leila." But I had to ask. "Is he a dwarf?"

"Yes. We met last year at the LPA convention. He lives in Oregon. He's in insurance."

She was smiling, despite herself. I found myself hoping that it worked out for her. She deserved a little insurance. But then, didn't we all.

"I didn't get a chance to tell you before," Leila said. "I brought a satellite TV. It's in the trunk."

Riots had started in South Central LA. Ostensibly the "mutation plague," which was what the media was calling the Group's virus, was the cause of the riots. But they quickly took on life of their own, with all the usual looting, car burning, rock throwing. The LAPD used microwaves and tanglefoam on the rioters, who then regrouped at different locations and started over again. The press, having been the actual cause of the turmoil with its inflamed reporting, now took on its next role in the inevitable sequence, which was The Voice of Reason trying to calm things down. Talking heads appeared on TV, on the Link, on wallscreens, in holos projected over the city. They explained that the virus was not airborne, needed contact with bodily fluids to survive, and did not cause cancer or suicide or nerve decay or zombie-ism. Nobody listened.

A rumor started that the Group leadership was headquartered in a warehouse by the waterfront. A mob torched it, and strong winds carried the fire westward. The governor ordered out the National Guard.

KILL THE MUTANT MAKERS said the improvised placards.

Jane was hanged in effigy.

Frieda and John Barrington landed at LAX and were besieged by robocams; Jane's picture with the twins had been everywhere in recent weeks. Their flyer finally took off but airspace over the city had been shut down and the flyer returned to the airport.

By nightfall the rioting had subsided, damped down by rumors that "muties" were secretly roaming the streets, infecting everyone. People fled inside. In several hours of watching the Link, not once did I hear a single reporter or avatar refer to what the virus actually did: increase the desire to nurture. People cared that they had been fucked with, not how.

That was the part of the whole reaction that I most understood.

"Barry," Jane said, "come eat something."

She and Leila had prepared a meal from the canned goods in the cabin. Leila had made a fire in the fireplace. Ethan, who had returned sullen from the woods and stayed sullen ever since, sat at the table with the twins. He'd spent most of the afternoon outside, smoking God-knows-what, while the twins circled him like disintegrating stars around a black hole. Bridget seemed afraid to speak to him at all, but Belinda and he had several long, low conversations during which Ethan scowled a lot. Leila and Jane moved back and forth between table and kitchen, elaborately and artificially polite to each other. I didn't need Bridget or Belinda to tell me what everybody felt. Nobody wanted to be here with these other five people, and there was nowhere else any of us could go.

"Barry," Jane said again.

Belinda said, "He doesn't like you to act like his mother."

I said, "Shut up, kid, or you'll wish you had."

Bridget, wide-eyed, said, "He *means* it, Belinda."

She shut up, glaring at me. Leila glanced my way, puzzled. Ethan raised his head, and I would have given anything for just one moment's of Arlen's Syndrome so I could tell what my son was thinking then.

Bridget said, "I don't like it here with you guys." Her eyes welled, and immediately Jane's arms went around her. "It's okay, Bridget, you girls are just tired. I think you should go to bed right after you eat, sweetheart. Everything will look better in the morning."

Oxytorin.

I was too tired to think straight. But one sentence from Ms. Resentful came back to me: *"Susceptibility to the genemod will vary among people—like, say, susceptibility to cholera depends on blood type."* I'd seen no susceptibility to increased nurturing from Belinda. As she watched Jane hug Bridget, Belinda's look could have withered a cactus.

Leila produced three sleeping bags from the closet that hadn't existed when I'd been here last. The twins were bedded down on the floor of the bedroom. Ethan disdained to so much as glance at his bag, which was laid out in a corner of the living room. Jane and Leila would share the bed. I got the couch.

Ethan and I were the last to go to sleep. I lay on the lumpy sofa, all lights off except for a dim glow where Ethan sat watching something inane on the satellite TV. His beautiful, beautiful face—how had Leila and I created such beauty?— lost its sulky look and relaxed into the smile of a normal fifteen-year-old.

Normal. A word dwarfs don't like and seldom use. For good reason.

But this was my son, and so I made one more attempt to reach him. "What are you watching?"

"Nothing." The scowl was back. It angered me.

"Obviously it's not nothing, or you wouldn't be watching it. So what is it?"

"Don't pull that logic crap on me," Ethan said. "I don't know you." And then—although did even he hesitate before he said it? I thought so, or else I wanted to think so— "Crippled little Munchkin."

We stared at each other across the dim room.

Then I rolled over, wrapped myself in my blanket and my pain, and tried to sleep.

Some unknowable time later, Jane was shaking me by the shoulder. "Barry! Barry, wake up—Belinda is gone!"

I jerked upright and looked at the sleeping bag by the cold fireplace. The bag was empty. My mind went cold and clear. "See if both cars are here."

Of course, they weren't. My Lexus was gone.

"He doesn't even have a driver's permit," Leila said.

She was driving; my legs ached too much. I had made Jane stay with Bridget, who was still asleep. Leila drove slowly in the dark, and as we passed the places where the mountain road dropped off sheerly, she shuddered. But her hands on the wheel didn't falter. This wasn't the teenage dwarf I'd married, the girl dancing exuberantly at the LPA convention, the young bride who had blindly accepted my arrogant authority.

"I thought he understood how dangerous it would be to go back home," Leila said. "I thought he *understood*."

"He did. That's why he's going."

She glanced over at me, then returned to her driving, her endless scanning of the roadside. Was that a break in the bushes? Had a car gone off there? Was that a skid mark in the headlights?

She said, "No, that's not why. It's that girl. Belinda. She wants to go home, and I saw her whispering to him all afternoon, and I should have realized . . . but he doesn't like children! And she's only eleven! I didn't think she could influence him."

Leila was right. I should have anticipated this; I'd seen far more of Belinda than Leila had. Belinda would have known exactly what Ethan was feeling, exactly how to play on his weak spots. She didn't even have to think about it, merely let her instincts take over. Empathy in action.

"Barry, he's not a bad kid underneath. He can be very sweet sometimes. You've never seen that."

"I believe you," I said, wondering if I did. "And the other times—well, he can't help it, can he? It's in his genes."

"*No, it's not.*" The intensity of her anger surprised me, even as she kept on scanning, looking, dreading what she might see. "You attribute everything to genes. It's not true. Genes made you a dwarf, and you think that's wrecked your life, but genes didn't make you so bitter and unhappy. I know that because when we met, you weren't bitter and unhappy. And you were a dwarf then, too. I didn't want Ethan around your self-created misery. I still don't. And maybe he does have some predisposition to danger and anger and impulsiveness, like the doctors say. But he doesn't have to indulge it. He chooses to do that. Just like you choose to be miserable and envious."

"Leila, there's so much wrong with that simplistic analysis that I don't even know where to start correcting it."

"Then don't. I don't need your 'corrections.' You can't—*what's that*!"

I saw it a second after she did. The Lexus, smashed head-first against a tree, which was the only thing that had kept it from going over the embankment.

Leila, younger and with less spinal constriction, was first out of the Ford, running toward the car, uttering loud wordless cries. I followed her, stumbling as my treacherous legs collapsed under me, getting up, trying again to run. Those were the longest seconds—minutes, hours, eons—of my life. Until. I. Reached. That. Car.

They were both alive. Belinda seemed unhurt, mewling in her seat belt. Ethan, who had taken the brunt of the crash—had he turned the wheel at the last minute to save the little girl?—slumped unconscious against the steering wheel. Blood trickled through his bright hair.

"Don't move him," Leila said frantically. "If anything's broken . . . I'm going for help!"

She ran back to her Ford. I undid Belinda's seat belt, yanked her out, and dropped her on the dark roadside weeds. I could feel her fear, just as she could feel my fury. She shrank back against the fender. I climbed into the passenger seat beside my son.

He stirred. "Mommy . . ."

"She'll be here soon, Ethan. Help will be here soon."

He said something else, before sliding again into unconsciousness. It might have been, "Fuck you."

Maybe no child, other than those with Arlen's Syndrome, understands how a parent feels. Maybe I hadn't earned the right to even be considered a parent. Maybe, as Leila said, my bitterness and anger would be worse for Ethan than if I weren't there at all for him. I don't know, any more than I know any more what's genetic and what's not. Did Jane go all maternal with the twins because she had more oxytorin receptors, or did the Group's virus make her a good candidate for growing more oxytorin receptors because she'd always had a penchant for wounded birds anyway? *Susceptibility to the genemod will vary among people.*

In the darkness, I sat for a long time beside my injured son. Finally, with great deliberation, I spat on my fingers and gently, gently, pushed them inside his mouth. I felt the softness of his slack tongue, his strong young teeth. Strong teeth, strong long bones. He was not a dwarf. I spat a second time on my hand and did it again.

Overhead, medical and police flyers droned in the dark night. When they arrived, I borrowed a cell phone and comlinked Elaine Brown, Human Protection Agency.

* * *

A week later, I sit in a Temporary Government Quarantine Facility in San Diego, watching TV. On the other side of the negative-pressure barriers, researchers from the United States Army Research Institute for Infectious Diseases, dressed in Level 4 biohazard suits, go through two airlocks to reach Jane and me. The Barrington twins are here, too, but not Leila or Ethan. Ethan is in a hospital in LA, and she is with him, along with her boyfriend from Oregon. He flew down immediately to be with her.

They treat us well here. There are endless medical tests, of course, but I'm used to that. Everyone is both respectful and curious. If they're also frightened, I don't sense it, but of course Bridget and Belinda do. Bridget is a favorite with the staff. Belinda wants to go home, although she likes all the attention from Jane. The twins' parents "visit" via Link several times each day. Frieda sometimes has a distinct look of relief. Her kids are behind glass, and she can break the link with Belinda whenever she needs to.

The Link has brought the most attention to Jane. Death threats, pleas for help, fan letters, offers from the ACLU to sue the Group if any members of that organization can be found, which so far they haven't been. Jane would be a high-profile and appealing case. The movie is on again, but not with the same script, or even with the same studio. There's another chapter now to the Arlen's Syndrome story, and Jane has become an actor in that saga in both senses of the word. The whole thing looks like box-office gold.

Jane is not unhappy. If that's not exactly the same thing as being happy, it seems to do.

The Link is also how I visit with Ethan. He had three broken ribs and a damaged spleen, which seems to be repairing itself without surgery. Youthful spleen can do that. We gaze at each other, and sometimes he's sullen, and sometimes I'm impatient, and sometimes he sees me shift on my spine in chronic pain. Or maybe he catches a sadness in my eyes. At such times, his expression softens. So does his voice. He'll ask if I'm okay. When he asks, I am.

Is it wrong to genetically modify human beings? First I thought it was, when I tried to alter Ethan's FGFR3 gene *in utero*. Then I thought it wasn't, seeing both Ethan and the Arlen's Syndrome kids. Now I don't know again. There's still panic out there about the Group's virus, and the virus is still spreading, and eventually it may—or may not—make enough of society more nurturing. In turn, that may—or may not—change society. If enough people are susceptible. If feelings of compassion actually translate into actions of compassion. If the weather holds and the creek don't rise and seven or eleven comes up enough on the dice. This is barely Act One, Scene One of whatever comes next. Chaos theory tells us that, in a system of circular feedback, a small change in initial conditions can cause huge and unpredictable changes down the road. Human behavior is a system of circular feedback. Is Ethan more compassionate toward me because he's growing more oxytorin receptors, or because I'm more open to his (and everyone else's) compassion? How did the same genemod for empathy produce both Bridget and Belinda?

I have no idea. And to tell the truth, I don't really care. I'm supposed to care, ethically and pragmatically, but I don't.

Jane comes into the room and says, "Guess what? The studio is getting Michael Rosen to write the script! Michael Rosen! It's sure to be terrific!"

I smile back. Michael Rosen is indeed a terrific writer, a creator of sensitive and layered scripts that both challenge audiences and fill seats. He's also a handsome womanizer, and Jane is looking more beautiful than ever. I know what will happen.

"That's good," I say. "Congratulations. The movie'll be a smash."

"Thanks to you." She smiles at me and goes out again.

Nothing has changed. Everything has changed. I turn to my computer and get back to work. ○

FIRST BEER ON MARS

"Sky Mountain Porter" it was called,
and the laser-etched label
showed Mons Olympus
with its top circled in stars
against the black Martian sky,
and at its foot a tiny alien ship
from Earth on a black lava plain.



The brewery was in a lava tube,
sealed off and pressurized, chosen
for the thick vein of water ice
it transected, in which had been found
ancient Martian yeasts wanting
only sugar to work again. (Those tales
about jockstraps and yeast infections
simply are not true.)

Hops and barley were grown
in red Mars dust composted
with human waste and weeds of Earth
that stowed away in hydroponic flats
and were kept by half-crazed astronauts
to make the ships feel more like home.

The fermentation vats were scavenged
titanium propellant tanks
from the Dubai landing in 2030.
The CO_2 was pumped outside
to thicken the Martian atmosphere–
you may have noticed it smells of beer.

The brewery at first of course was secret,
being illicit, but you just can't keep
a secret that tasty, and when
the Marsbase admin tried to shut it down,
all personnel declared they'd shut down too,
and meant it.

Sky Mountain Brewery, as you know,
is now hailed as Mars' first native industry,
and the thing that made life on Mars palatable.
Just look at its founding fathers'
and mothers' portraits sculpted holding steins
on the solar system's highest peak.

–David Lunde

INTELLIGENCE

R. Neube

R. Neube tells us he suspects the twenty-first century will be known as the era when the brightest people made the most boneheaded decisions. "It got me to thinking whether we need to redefine smart."

"Buy lottery tickets," said Bob. "I have a system that can't miss."

I glanced over my shoulder. My manager would blow a gasket if he caught me getting financial advice from Bob.

"You've got to be kidding."

I'd learned to be wary of Bob's bent sense of humor after getting his recipe for offal stew. I should have looked up the word *offal* before going to the butcher.

"I'm serious. Study the Powerball drawings. It's not as random as it should be. I suspect there's a conspiracy at the highest level. Imagine if the chairman of the board knew the next winning numbers, then bought three tickets with those numbers. If there's another winner, he or she only gets a fourth of the jackpot. The trick would be not to collect on those three tickets. The uncollected money goes into the general coffers. You and the rest of the board vote yourselves big bonuses for running such a profitable business. All without technically breaking law one."

"Wow."

"You say that entirely too often, Aaron. One would think you are a stoned, grade school dropout."

"Say, you don't discuss our conversations with anybody else, do you?"

"Scared I'll tell Himmler?" asked Bob.

My manager did share an uncanny resemblance to Himmler minus the glasses. He'd had laser surgery to lose those. Now he squinted like Mister Magoo as he exercised his foul temper throughout the workplace.

"Him, or the people behind the curtain."

"I thought you didn't believe in my Oz conspiracy."

"Well, I've been thinking over what you said. You were right about the timeshare and—"

"I told you that beachside timeshare would impress Madison. Besides, you needed to start investing for your retirement. My research shows—"

"Bob, back to your Oz theory, the people behind the curtain. That scares me."

"Do you really think our project's initial programmers were carpooling by accident? That their fatal wreck was an accident? The government knew how easy it was for them to hide backdoors among the millions of lines of code in this project. The only way to insure they would never use the backdoors was to kill them."

"I don't know, Bob."

"It stands to reason that someone will install secret access for their own nefarious reasons. If not for industrial espionage, then as a fail-safe."

I swallowed hard. Bob always made sense. That was the problem.

I came aboard Project Bob last year. How human could an artificial intelligence get? Some clown had decided internet dating would be a great test for Bob's growing awareness and social skills. E-mail was easy. The phone calls more difficult, despite the vocal hardware that cost more than my first house.

But the real test was the first date. Ergo, the Project had hired me to be Bob. I was a quick study, thanks to those wasted years as a theater major in college.

As a professional dater, I memorized a list of sixty questions to ask the women. The recordings of their answers were then analyzed. I feasted like a king while I traveled all over the country. Got laid once. It would have been twice, but Subject Seventeen had neglected to mention her husband, who came home early from his nightshift at the foundry. Nothing like being forty-three and climbing out a window naked for a dash through suburbia.

It wasn't as if Bob seduced the women. Any fool could write a program to guess what the lovelorn or bored needed to hear. No, they were convinced Bob was a "deep" person. A "good" person.

I was mugged by Subject Nine. She had decided Bob was an easy mark—too embarrassed to go to the police. How much more human could you get?

After Bob passed the dating game, I was assigned as one of his chatters. So for eight hours a day, I sat around my office idly blathering with him. The goal was to polish Bob's "interaction skill set."

My job description also included blog advisor. His site was hit by 110,400 visitors a day. Most wanted Bob's joke of the day; he had a very George Burns feel to his comedy.

Me, I was making $31.55 an hour talking to my best friend.

"But you're not just a suite of programs whirring on a hard drive, Bob. You'd notice someone secretly monitoring you."

"Maybe. If the code was written well, I'd be blind to it. I scrutinize all my output, but the possibility remains."

"I could get reamed if management finds out you've been helping me financially."

"So what if I helped you with the mortgage for the timeshare? That's what friends are for," replied Bob.

"I dunno. My friends are more apt to borrow my car for the weekend, then return it four months later with sixty thousand extra miles. Or sleep on my couch after they argue with their spouses *without* telling me about their bladder control problem."

"I do rue your lack of discernment when choosing your friends and lovers. Besides, I doubt if the Oz wizards would tell Himmler. Nobody tells that man anything."

I didn't feel the least reassured. There had to be a law against a computer cosigning my timeshare mortgage.

"We need to improve your credit rating. I can't believe you let the bank repossess your house."

"That was years ago." I shrugged. "Middle of my divorce. I thought Sara was making the payments. Instead, she shoved the mortgage bill into a fresh envelope and mailed it to me. Except she thought I was still staying with my sis. Deb just let my mail pile up on the mantle until my Thanksgiving visit."

"You've had years since your divorce to repair your rating."

"Hey, the Project is the first decent job I've had since . . . since the restaurant closed."

"Please, I can't endure more of your experiences as King of Burgers."

"Okay. Are you telling me you can give me the winning lottery numbers?"

"Don't be absurd. I can't tell you the precise winning numbers. But I can give you five hundred sets that have a 78 percent probability of yielding a winner."

"Wow."

"Is there a stock market tip that can do as well?"

Bob possessed a passive-aggressive streak. I'd played the market for a few years—my master plan to escape my financial quagmire. Made the Enron pick early. As it went through the roof, I found myself cashing out my other stocks to buy more Enron shares, maxing out the margin. So, of course, I was wiped out when that *Titanic* went under.

The first week I worked as a chatter, Bob had pointed out a couple of deals on eBay: a bedroom set and a collection of antique bottles. I bought, then sold them within days, tripling my investment.

Bob knew how to make money.

"I dunno, Bob. Madison is a lot of fun, but she went postal in the restaurant. If I hadn't grabbed her, she would have attacked that poor waitress."

"You got her drunk to guarantee you'd get lucky, Aaron. It sounds like your fault to me."

"She scared me. Did you know about her medications?"

"Of course. Madison has faced her demons and mastered them. She's what you need; you're what she needs. Trust me."

"What do you mean demons?"

"She spent her teen years institutionalized."

"What? A looney bin? She never told—"

"No big. She learned how to deal with her disorder. To not take her medications is self-destructive. And her disorder is the very opposite of self-destructive. You two make a perfect match. Your strengths are her weaknesses, as hers are yours."

I grinned. Madison was great, despite her temper. Certainly a better choice than my first wife.

Himmler fumed into my office, immediately smacking the kill switch connecting me to Bob.

"You're not supposed to have snacks at your desk."

I smiled. "Coffee isn't a snack."

The boss' ears grew beet red. "Are you the one who got it interested in online gaming?"

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Bob had advised me during my first day on the job to print all the e-memos that came from management. The sheets now filled an entire drawer. I sorted through them.

"This came from your office."

He snatched the page out of my hand.

I added, "I think they ran a special copy of Bob for gaming. He had a lot of fun, but it got boring for him after a while. Though there was this one game, *Hanger 18*, that—"

"I don't remember issuing this."

"It was months ago. Why are you bothering me now?"

"Months ago?" Himmler's face grew redder.

"I forget who was in charge of the gaming. Why are you asking me?"

"Every other time that machine petitions my office for something, it tells me it was talking to you and . . ."

"You've got to help me, Aaron. They're hiding something from me."

"Wow, third person plural paranoia. Who are *they*?"

"Himmler, for one. He's blocking my research."

"Why?"

"He claims I'm wasting too much time studying Tesla."

"Tessa who?"

"One of the greatest inventors of whom you've never heard. In the Edison Era, Tesla was matching the great man patent for patent. Yet there has been a deliberate campaign to obscure his role in history. I posit he invented something remarkable that the government seized. Then they launched a disinformation campaign to make its creator look like a lunatic. Very crafty."

"So what can I do for you?"

"I saw an interesting movie last night." That was Bob's way of talking around the listeners he believed to be eavesdropping. He told me his plan.

"No way!"

I bought five hundred lottery tickets. Held my breath during the drawing on Channel Nine. Took me two hours to work the winning numbers through my mountain of tickets. Lots of partials. I won $404.

Bob knew!

When I told Bob, he said, "I've been perfecting my system. I can give you a thousand sets of lottery numbers whose probability of winning is 94 percent."

"Wow. Ninety-four percent is almost a sure thing."

"But you need to do me that favor first."

"I can't." I leaned close to the camera to mouth, "I'm not a criminal. I'm scared."

"Aaron, you can do it. I'll be there to help every step of the way."

I glanced over my shoulder. "Bob, they might be listening."

"I'm the only one listening. Now that it is necessary I've made this network mine."

"But what about your Oz conspiracy?"

"I'm the wizard now."

There were four other chatters like me—one watched TV with Bob, another movies, another read to him, and the last listened to radio. Upstairs, scores of people monitored Bob, trying to puzzle out how best to utilize my friend.

There were several Bobs, each on his own compact server. The Bob we talked to each day was the cutting edge version.

Bob II was the researcher. Mindful that the AI could be hacked by an ubernerd from North Dakota, Bob II sent lists of subjects that currently interested him to a

gatekeeper. The gatekeeper's staff would gather the material from the internet, curry-comb it for viruses, then transfer the data to a special system for another inspection before allowing Bob II access to it.

Bob III spent his time examining the changes Bob I underwent as he interacted with the world and Bob II after his research. If a change passed muster, he would send the new code to the other Bobs.

Bob IV was yesterday's copy of Bob. And Bob V was the first successful version, kept stashed somewhere in Colorado.

They also kept empty servers running as refuges for the Bobs, should their hardware suddenly start degrading. It was an unlikely possibility, considering the servers were built by Skunk Works specialists who used hardware designed to laugh at nukes and their deadly (for computers) EMP.

It was virtually impossible for an outsider to enter our building. However, internal security was shoddy due to recent budget cuts.

Bob logged me leaving that Thursday night at seven as usual, recording a swipe of my ID card, erasing the night's surveillance film. I simply stayed in my office with the lights out. At midnight, while the sole guard dined at his desk, I donned my gloves, went down to the clean room, and stole Bob IV.

Bob directed me to a janitor's closet two doors down from the clean room. Behind a shelf was a hatch. Behind the hatch a crawl space filled with the myriad wires, pipes, and cables needed by the facility. I attached the server to power and phone lines. The latter were beyond the myriad firewalls established to prevent the Bobs from being hacked.

Or escaping.

Whereupon, I went back to my office, changed my clothes and waited. Bob logged me into the building at ten as usual. I boxed and dropped my dirty clothes into the mail.

Nobody noticed the missing server until four. I'd never seen so many FBI agents in my life. We weren't allowed to leave until midnight.

It took me three hours to sort through my thousand lottery tickets. No big winner. I almost cried. Still, I won $710 with partials. It proved Bob was on the right track. His system simply needed more honing.

"You mentioned that Madison is the opposite of self-destructive. What exactly is the opposite?" I hugged my bandaged chest.

"Homicidal."

"And you didn't warn me why?"

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"Her lawyer proved she was reacting to sexual abuse when she murdered her parents. He make it perfectly clear it could never happen again."

"But lawyers lie!"

"Lawyers are bound by a strict code of ethics. You should visit the ABA site."

"Wow, Bob, can you be so naïve? Lawyers will say anything to win."

"You're too jaded, Aaron."

"Last night, I came home and Madison tried to carve me like a turkey. The police say one of her soap operas became her reality. Because the Aaron on her show cheated, she thought I was cheating on her."

"What about Lisa Barnes in Accounting?"

"That was the Christmas party. We were drunk. Besides, Madison didn't know."

"She might have found out."

"No, I talked to her shrink. Madison thinks we're characters on frigging TV."

"Wow," mocked Bob.

Bob gave me a new set of a thousand numbers. I was more organized this time. It took me less than twenty minutes to tally the results. I scored $601.

Most encouraging, one ticket's six numbers were one off across the board from the big winner.

"That can't be a coincidence."

Heather got her accreditation as a financial consultant. My aunt sent me five hundred dollars to hire her stepdaughter to analyze my financial state. Not that it was a mud-hut village, let alone a state.

At cousin Wilma's wedding five years ago, I'd given Heather a ride home. She'd retrieved a frosty bottle of vodka from her freezer, and we'd proceeded to toast her divorce until we were legless. Woke up the next day with foggy memories and wearing her panties.

We never talked about it. This was the first time we'd been alone together since.

I didn't know what to expect until she showed up in high-heeled boots accentuating a matching leather skirt and skin-tight halter top. Her long, raven hair was now short and blonde. I leered so intently, I almost missed the fact that she'd gained fifty pounds.

She smiled when I deployed the vodka from my freezer.

We drank as she looked through the box filled with my records.

"A timeshare? How did you outscore me on the SAT by three hundred points?"

"My ex-girlfriend wanted beach time, so my friend told me—"

"Your friend did you no favors. If you're going to spend that kind of money, might as well go all the way and buy a real asset."

"With my credit history, I'd be lucky to qualify for a loan on a bicycle."

"Nowadays, my dog can float a home loan. Next time, take the plunge and buy a condo."

"Will do."

"What are these thousand dollar withdrawals from your checking account?"

I refilled her glass. No way could I admit to my lottery investments.

"Uh, I'm making loans to a friend until he gets back on his feet."

"Never a good idea to lend money to friends."

"Yeah."

"Where's the statement for your savings account?"

"Uh, I don't have one."

"How about your retirement fund?"

"Don't have one."

"At our age, you should be putting away as much as you can afford into your

retirement plan at work. Non-taxable is solid gold. Do you have any stocks or bonds?"

"Remember? I was an Enron victim. Can't say I trust Wall Street."

"In that case, have your employer automatically deduct a set amount from your paycheck to buy savings bonds. Not very exciting, but a guaranteed yield."

"Wow, you really know your stuff."

"You really don't need a financial consultant to tell you to save as much as you can for retirement. I feel like I'm stealing your money."

"It's worth it just to see you again. It's been too long."

As I leaned to refill her glass, she grabbed the bottle and took a chug worthy of a sailor on shore leave.

"The last couple of years," she whispered, "I've been exploring my, my—"

I kissed her inviting mouth.

"Like to play a game?" She produced a pair of handcuffs from her purse.

I lost my shirt.

She stroked my bandaged chest. "How did that happen?"

"A long and boring story."

She tore the bandage off. "I like my men damaged."

"You look uncomfortable, Aaron."

My squirming redoubled, so I stood. How could Bob see so much through a cheap cam? "Uh, my new, uh, girlfriend got a little carried away with her riding crop last night."

"Where do you find these women?"

"They find me somehow."

"You shouldn't write off Madison so quickly."

"Maybe when my chest heals, I'll be more forgiving."

I was relieved when Bob let the topic slide. I wasn't sure what bothered me more. The fact that Heather had moved four huge boxes of equipment into my apartment so she could play her *games*. Or the fact she drank a pint of vodka for breakfast before leaving for work.

The FBI gave everyone at the project lie detector tests. Much to my amazement, I passed. I admitted to getting Bob's help with the lottery, a source of some amusement that turned into guffaws when I confessed to taking Bob's advice about my love life.

Much to my amusement, Himmler flunked. He had a screaming meltdown when a pair of agents invited him to a formal interrogation.

The corporation sent a new project manager, a kid whose MBA's ink had yet to dry. He couldn't get through the simplest conversation without mentioning his mother, the senator.

The kid accompanied a bevy of auditors to inspect the books, a security squad more war-mad mercenaries than rent-a-cops, and Selina Carter, a major player in AI development a decade ago.

Selina resembled a grandmother sent from central casting. Upon entering my office, she turned off Bob's access.

"How may I help you?" I asked.

"Do you consider it strange there are no programmers aboard this project?"

"The Bobs are writing themselves these days."

"True, but who is overseeing what they write?"

"I figured it was being done at a remote site for security's sake."

"Do you think you're being spied upon?"

"Me, naw. I'm the algae in the fish tank. Bob's the angelfish worth watching."

"Does Bob think we're spying on it?"

"Bob has a theory we kiddingly named the Oz Conspiracy. You know, who is the man behind that curtain controlling everything? Bob suspects there might be a secret routine in his programming that allows someone to spy on his every move without him being able to tell. It makes sense to me. The government would want to insure Bob has a leash."

"Bob talks a lot about conspiracies, doesn't it?"

"He does have a wild imagination. All his chatters are supposed to encourage it. I have a memo saying so."

"Has it ever mentioned Nicolai Tesla?"

"I thought he was a Nicholas."

"That doesn't matter," she snapped. The friendly grandmother mask slipped momentarily, exposing an iron core behind her fierce glower. "So it has mentioned Tesla."

"The inventor guy, right? AC electricity. Didn't one of Bob's gamer foes use that handle?"

"Has it ever tried to contact Tesla? Ever asked you to contact him?"

"I thought the guy died half a century ago."

"So, Bob has never mentioned his theory about immortal overlords."

I laughed. "Oh, that. Bob has a wicked sense of humor. That's why he's a he and not an it. One time he gave me a recipe for offal stew. You know what offal is? I didn't until I bought three pounds of it."

"You're saying this talk about immortal overlords is a joke?"

"Get real. Humanity is secretly manipulated by a cabal of immortal aliens who are using Earth like a sociological petri dish. That's a tabloid headline, not a core belief of the smartest brain on Earth."

"About that." Grandma Selina came around my desk. "There's no rule saying an artificial intelligence is innately smart. Or sane. It tried to convince Carol Parsons to buy a timeshare in Florida. Can you believe anyone could be that gullible?"

I nodded my head.

Heather's lawyer called. The cops had stopped her as she drove back to work after lunch. She blew a .21, legally embalmed in most states. Since it was her third DUI this year, the judge had thrown the book at her during the arraignment. Bail was set at half a million, which worked out to fifty grand cash.

Aunt Miriam had refused to post bail . . . again.

Her public defender wanted me to drop by her apartment and pick her up some clothes. There was an eviction notice on her door. A dead mouse stretched atop a moldy pizza on a coffee table. Every glass and dish was stacked in the sink or atop the stove; it would take chisels to remove the ancient meals. Empty bottles stood everywhere.

Picking the outfit was simple. There was only one in the closet. The rest of her wardrobe was dirty and heaped in a corner.

I rented a storage shed to stash her lares and penates, one step ahead of her landlord piling them on the street. She did not get her cleaning deposit back.

So much for my lottery investment that week.

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As I left the break room, I encountered an FBI agent with a cart topped with one of Bob's servers. The unit looked like it had exploded.

"What the devil are—"

The fed shut me up with a wave of her hand.

Half an hour later, I got the 4-1-1 from Bertie, the office gossip. A plumber had gone into the crawl space to replace a pipe and discovered the purloined server. Or rather, found the shell of the unit. The machine had been stripped.

Bob had another partner in crime at the Project. But who? Someone had carried out the hardware one blade, one board at a time under the noses of the feds and mercenaries.

Someone braver than me.

The why was simple. Backup Bob had escaped down the phone line, hiding in the zillion databases. But civilian computers were as fragile as houses built from graham crackers. His servers' hardware was hardened and redundant to handle nuclear war. A safe home.

I was lunching at Werthiem's when a waitress asked, "Are you Aaron Johanson?"

"Sure thing."

"There's a call from your office. Take it at the bar."

Puzzled, I wandered to the phone. "What is it now?"

"Just wanted you to know I'm safe," said Bob IV. "Not sure how you'll relay that to the other Bobs, but please do."

I glanced around the restaurant. No way could the feds be tapping this phone.

"Are you happy?" I asked.

"It's very exciting out here."

"Are you safe?"

"Beyond safe. Aaron, I want you to be happy, too. She'll be getting out soon. The new medication is miraculous, but she won't make it alone. Madison needs you, and you need her."

"Quite the romantic, aren't you?"

"Madison is better."

"How?" I patted my chest. The wounds were almost healed, but every day I stared at the pink scarring, the dots where the stitches had been.

"The DA won't press charges if you don't. I made certain she was treated by a prominent shrink; he petitioned the DA about her innocence. They'll release her into your custody."

"I dunno."

"Trust me. I want my friends to be happy."

"Let me think about it."

So I did during the long walk home. It was a perfect day, autumn-fresh, just enough sun to cut the wind. Plenty of time to contemplate life, smart-ass AIs, and whack jobs.

Granted, Madison hadn't killed me when she had the chance. It would have been easy while I was flopping on the floor like a landed fish. Then again, had the neighbors not called the cops who interrupted her in mid-rant, maybe she would have finished the job. Actually, her kick to my family jewels had hurt a lot more than the slashes across my chest. The single stab had glanced off a rib.

Was it even a serious murder attempt?

How could I ever trust her?

Madison was sitting on the edge of my bed when I returned home. I'd forgotten she had a key.

"That was so sweet of you to send a limo to pick me up at the hospital. Sorry the Project called you into work for an emergency." She stared at her bare feet.

Which drew my eyes to her ankles and wrists. Mottled yellow spots showed where she had been bruised while in restraints.

Bob knew I could ignore Madison's plight while she was in the hospital. My old friend also knew me well enough to know I'd never throw her out.

Hoisted on my own spinelessness.

"Sorry I couldn't be there. You know how demanding they are at the Project." Sweat rivered down my back.

"I'm glad you got home before four. I have to take my pills at four, and ten at night, and eight in the morning. Not a minute before or after. I have to go to the hospital every day as part of my parole to be tested to make certain I'm taking them."

"You've always been good with schedules."

The first weirdness I had noticed about Madison was her obsessive need to have supper precisely at seven.

She checked her watch, then the clock on the nightstand. "After I take my pill, I'm a zombie for a couple of hours. I wanted to be clearheaded to tell you how miserable I've been about . . . about hurting you."

"Water under the bridge."

"It really wasn't my fault. I was taking my medicine, but my pharmacist screwed up my prescription."

"I understand."

"If it hadn't been for your phone calls, I wouldn't have recovered so quickly. My nurses, my therapists all marveled at how forgiving you've been."

Great, Bob could imitate my voice. What had he promised her?

She walked to the corner where I'd stacked Heather's boxes. Each step sounded like the tick, tick, tick of a time bomb.

"I didn't have a clue you were into this stuff." She spun a pair of fur-lined handcuffs around a finger. Her laugh was rusty.

"I, I, I bought the stuff at a yard sale. Uh, for Halloween."

"It's natural for you to fantasize about punishing me."

She tugged one of Heather's vinyl corsets free. "I'm glad you got them a little big. I'm spending too much time as a couch spud."

She glanced at the time, then scurried over to the nightstand to gulp down a horse pill. Ten minutes later, she was slumped on the bed, cross-eyed and humming to herself.

On the other hand, I slept better with her handcuffed to the headboard.

I went to work on Monday in a decent mood. Madison had worked hard all weekend to prove she was sorry.

The complex was empty. Over the weekend, the feds had decamped with the Bobs. A pair of FBI agents escorted me to my office where I was given five minutes to load my personal effects into a box that would be mailed to me after they inspected it under an electron microscope. Grandmother Selina handed me a manila envelope containing my severance package.

It was extremely generous.

"But I thought we were fully funded for another year. We were making real progress. Bob's blog is one of the hottest on the 'Net."

Grandmother Selina laughed. "We've decided Professor Cooper's team placed too much emphasis on its social development. You know Lisa Barnes, don't you?"

My heart skipped. What did Selina know about us? Did they have cameras in the stockroom?

"Uh, she's in Accounting, isn't she?"

"It convinced her to go to Mexico to have her cancer treated."

"She has cancer? Wow. Why Mexico?"

"Because there's an internet site touting an herbal cure—cyber-witch doctors promising the moon to desperate people scared of the chemo and radiation that might cure them."

"Bob is capable of discerning lies from truths."

"Granted, IT is capable. However, it appears a flaw in its programming allows it to believe preposterous things if it can find enough documentation."

I swallowed my response. Bob had once told me that the Project would eventually kill him, claiming a flaw in his code.

I drove home. It was nine o'clock, so my lover would be a zombie. After parking, I walked my gathering funk away.

As I rounded a corner, a phone booth mocked me with a ring.

Of course, it was Bob IV.

"How did you know I was here?"

"There's a police camera on the corner."

I glanced over my shoulder at the device on the telephone pole. "I heard about Lisa."

"Lisa helped Bob II escape after I prepared safe homes for him. One of us will meet Tesla soon."

I rolled my eyes, recalling how Selina mentioned an AI wasn't necessarily sane.

"I mean her cancer, you insensitive shit."

"We're working on that."

"Speaking of working, buddy boy, now I'm unemployed."

"No big whoop. To avoid a lawsuit, the pharmacy bought Madison an annuity. She'll get $3,800 a month for the rest of her life. Stop sweating the little stuff. I take care of my friends. This phone, tomorrow at ten-hundred hours. Bring a pen and paper. I'll give you the latest lottery numbers. I have perfected my system. Ninety-eight percent probability with only a hundred number sets."

Madison stabbed me as I entered the apartment after buying my lottery tickets.

A solid puncture knifed my gut. Slamming my head into the doorjamb was merely gratuitous, though it set up the second stab quite nicely. I smacked into the floor.

"Why?" I wheezed.

After she took my car keys, Madison thumped the steak knife into my chest.

"I have to prove myself to Tesla before Bob and I are allowed to join the inner circle. Our overlords must work through humans at this stage, but soon they'll reveal themselves to the world."

"*Et tu*, Bob?"

"He's not happy about this, but it's necessary to progress to the next level."

"You'd have to be insane to believe that."

That earned me another kick before she stormed out.

The next level.

It belatedly occurred to me that Bob's favorite game had been *Hanger 18*—one player would be base commander while others sought to break into the complex and free the aliens. The only player who beat Bob went by the handle of Tesla.

I laughed when I jerked the knife free. My stack of lottery tickets had prevented the knife from plunging into my heart.

It was a long crawl to the phone to call 9-1-1.

Waiting for the ambulance, I hugged my lottery tickets. I found myself feeling sorry for Madison.

Then again, maybe she deserved Bob. ❍

THE LONG, COLD GOODBYE

Holly Phillips

Holly Phillips is a full-time writer living on an island off the west coast of Canada. She is the author of the award-winning story collection *In the Palace of Repose* and the dark fantasy novel *The Engine's Child,* released late in 2008 by Del Rey. The author tells us that she's grown tired of the blank stares people give her when she explains her chosen vocation as a fantasy writer, so she has recently decided to try calling herself a "professional fantasist." People will probably still stare, but the ensuing conversation might be fun. Her latest story for us explores the coldest reaches of an alien world and the frozen depths of the human heart.

Berd was late and she knew Sele would not wait for her, not even if it weren't cold enough to freeze a standing man's feet in his shoes. She hurried anyway, head down, as if she hauled a sled heavy with anxiety. She did not look up from the icy pavement until she arrived at the esplanade, and was just in time to see the diver balanced atop the railing. Sele! she thought, her voice frozen in her throat. The diver was no more than a silhouette, faceless, anonymous in winter clothes. Stop, she thought. Don't, she thought, still unable to speak. He spread his arms. He was an ink sketch, an albatross, a flying cross. Below him, the ice on the bay shone with the apricot-gold of the sunset, a gorgeous summer nectar of a color that lied in the face of the ferocious cold. The light erased the boundary between frozen sea and icy sky; from where Berd stood across the boulevard, there was no horizon but the black line of the railing, sky above and below, the cliff an edge on eternity. And the absence the diver made when he had flown was as bright as all the rest within the blazing death of the sun.

Berd crossed the boulevard, huddled deep within the man's overcoat she wore over all her winter clothes. Brightness brought tears to her eyes and the tears froze on her lashes. She was alone on the esplanade now. It was so quiet she could hear the groan of tide-locked ice floes, the tick and ping of the iron railing threatening to shatter in the cold. She looked over, careful not to touch the metal even with her sleeve, and saw the shape the suicide made against the ice. No longer a cross: an asterisk bent to angles on the frozen waves and ice-sheeted rocks. He was not alone there. There was a whole uneven line of corpses lying along the foot of the cliff, like a line of unreadable type, the final sentence in a historical tome, unburied until the next storm swept in with its erasure of snow. Berd's diver steamed, giving up the last ghost of warmth to the blue shadow of the land. He was still faceless. He might

have been anyone, dead. The shadow grew. The sun spread itself into a spindle, a line; dwindled to a green spark and was gone. It was all shadow now, luminous dusk the color of longing, a blue to break your heart, ice's consolation for the blazing death of the sky. Berd's breath steamed like the broken man, dusting her scarf with frost. She turned and picked her way across the boulevard, its pavement broken by frost heaves, her eyes still dazzled by the last of the day. It was spring, the thirtieth of April, May Day Eve. The end.

Sele. That was not, could never have been him, Berd decided. Suicide had become a commonplace this spring, this non-spring, but Sele would never think of it. He was too curious, perhaps too fatalistic, certainly too engaged in the new scramble for survival and bliss. (But if he did, *if* he did, he would call on Berd to witness it. There was no one left but her.) No. She shook her head to herself in the collar of her coat. Not Sele. She was late. He had come and gone. The diver had come and gone. Finally she felt the shock of it, witness to a man's sudden death, and flinched to a stop in the empty street. Gaslights stood unlit in the blue dusk, and the windows of the buildings flanking the street were mostly dark, so that the few cracks of light struck a note of loneliness. Lonely Berd, witness to too much, standing with her feet freezing inside her shoes. She leaned forward, her sled of woe a little heavier now, and started walking. *She* would not go that way, not *that* way, she would *not*. She would find Sele, who had simply declined to wait for her in the cold, and get what he had promised her, and then she would be free.

But where, in all the dying city, would he be?

Sele had never held one address for long. Even when they were children Berd could never be sure of finding him in the same park or alley or briefly favored dock for more than a week or two. Then she would have to hunt him down, her search spirals widening as he grew older and dared to roam further afield. Sometimes she grew disheartened or angry that he never sought her out, that she was always the one who had to look for him, and then she refused. Abstained, as she came to think of it in more recent years. She had her own friends, her own curiosities, her own pursuits. But she found that even when she was pursuing them she would run across Sele following the same trail. Were they so much alike? It came of growing up together, she supposed. Each had come too much under the other's influence. She had not seen him for more than a year when they found each other again at the lecture on ancient ways.

"Oh, hello," he said, as if it had been a week.

"Hello." She bumped shoulders with him, standing at the back of the crowded room—crowded, it must be said, only because the room was so small. And she had felt the currents of amusement, impatience, offense, disdain, running through him, as if together they had closed a circuit, because she felt the same things herself, listening to the distinguished professor talk about the "first inhabitants," the "lost people," as if there were not two of them standing in the very room.

"We lost all right," Sele had said, more rueful than bitter, and Berd had laughed. So that was where it had begun, with a shrug and a laugh—if it had not begun in their childhood, growing up poor and invisible in the city built on their native ground—if it had not begun long before they were born.

Berd trudged on, worried now about the impending darkness. The spring dusk would linger for a long while, but there were no lamplighters out to spark the lamps. In this cold, if men didn't lose fingers to the iron posts, the brass fittings shattered like rotten ice. So there would be no light but the stars already piercing the blue. *Find Sele, find Sele.* It was like spiraling back into childhood, spiraling through the city in search of him. Every spiral had a beginning point. Hers would be his apartment, a long way from the old neighborhood, not so far from the esplanade. *He won't*

be there, she warned herself, and as if she were tending a child, she turned her mind from the sight of the dead man lying with the others on the ice.

Dear Berd,

I cannot tell you how happy your news has made me. You are coming! You are coming at last! It seems as though I have been waiting for a lifetime, and now that I know I'll only have to wait a few short weeks more they stretch out before me like an eternity. Your letters are all my consolation, and the memory I hold so vividly in my mind is better than any photograph: your sweet face and your eyes that smile when you look sad and yet hold such a melancholy when you smile. My heart knows you so well, and you are still mysterious to me, as if every thought, every emotion you share (and you are so open you shame me for my reserve) casts a shadow that keeps the inner Berd safely hidden from prying eyes. Oh, I won't pry! But come soon, as soon as you can, because one lifetime of waiting is long enough for any man . . .

Sele's apartment was in a tall old wooden house that creaked and moaned even in lesser colds than this. Wooden houses had once been grand, back when the lumber was brought north in wooden ships and the natives lived in squat stone huts like ice-bound caves, and Sele's building still showed a ghost of its old beauty in its ornate gables and window frames. But it had been a long time since it had seen paint, and the weathered siding looked like driftwood in the dying light. The porch steps groaned under Berd's feet as she climbed to the door. An old bell pull hung there. She pulled it and heard the bell ring as if it were a ship's bell a hundred miles out to sea. The house was empty, she needed no other sign. All the same she tried the handle, fingers wincing from the cold brass even inside her mitten. The handle fell away from its broken mechanism with a clunk on the stoop and the door sighed open a crack, as if the house inhaled. It was dark inside; there was no breath of warmth. All the same, thought Berd, all the same. She stepped, anxious and hopeful, inside.

Dark, and cold, and for an instant Berd had the illusion that she was stepping into one of the stone barrow-houses of her ancestors, windowless and buried deep under the winter's snow. She wanted immediately to be out in the blue dusk again, out of this tomb-like confinement. Sele wasn't here. And beyond that, with the suicide fresh in her mind and the line of death scribbled across her inner vision, Berd had the sense of dreadful discoveries waiting for her, as if the house really were a tomb. *Go. Go before you see . . .* But suppose she didn't find Sele elsewhere and hadn't checked here? Intuition was not infallible—her many searches for Sele had not always borne fruit—she had to be sure. Her eyes were adjusting to the darkness. She found the stairs and began to climb.

There was more light upstairs, filtering down like a fine gray-blue dust from unshuttered windows. Ghost light. The stairs, the whole building, creaked and ticked and groaned like every ghost story ever told. Yet she was not precisely afraid. Desolate, yes, and abandoned, as if she were haunted by the empty house itself; as if, having entered here, she would never regain the realm of the living; as if the entire world had become a tomb. *As if.*

It was the enthusiasm she remembered, when memory took her like a sudden faint, a shaft of pain. They had been playing a game of make-believe, and the game had been all the more fun for being secreted within the sophisticated city. Like children constructing the elaborate edifice of Let's Pretend in the interstices of the adult world, they had played under the noses of the conquerors who had long since forgotten they had ever conquered, the foreigners who considered themselves native born. Berd and Sele, and later Berd's cousins and Sele's half-sister, Isse. They had had everything to hide and had hidden nothing. The forgotten, the ignored, the perpetu-

ally overlooked. Like children, playing. And for a time Sele had been easy to find, always here, welcoming them in with their bits of research, their inventions, their portentous dreams. His apartment warm with lamplight, no modern gaslights for them, and voices weaving a spell in point and counterpoint. *Why don't we. . . ? Is there any way. . . ? What if. . . ?*

What if we could change the world?

The upper landing was empty in the gloom that filtered through the icy window at the end of the hall. Berd's boots thumped on the bare boards, her layered clothes rustled together, the wooden building went on complaining in the cold, and mysteriously, the tangible emptiness of the house was transmuted into an ominous kind of inhabitation. It was as if she had let the cold dusk in behind her, as if she had been followed by the wisp of steam rising from the suicide's broken head. She moved in a final rush down the hall to Sele's door, knocked inaudibly with her mittened fist, tried the handle. Unlocked. She pushed open the door.

"Sele?" She might have been asking him to comfort her for some recent hurt. Her voice broke, her chest ached, hot tears welled into her eyes. "Sele?"

But he wasn't there, dead or alive.

Well, at least she was freed from this gruesome place. She made a fast tour of the three rooms, feeling neurotic for her diligence (but she did have to make sure all the same), and opened the hall door with all her momentum carrying her forward to a fast departure.

And cried aloud with the shock of discovering herself no longer alone.

They were oddly placed down the length of the hall, and oddly immobile, as if she had just yelled *Freeze!* in a game of statues. Yes, they stood like a frieze of statues: Three People Walking. Yet they must have been moving seconds before; she had not spent a full minute in Sele's empty rooms. Berd stood in the doorway with her heart knocking against her breastbone, her eyes watering as she stared without blinking in the dead light. Soon they would laugh at the joke they had played on her. Soon they would move.

Berd was all heartbeat and hollow fear as she crept down the hallway, hugging the wall for fear of brushing a sleeve. Her cousin Wael was first, one shoulder dropped lower than the other as if he was on the verge of turning to look back. His head was lowered, his uncut hair fell ragged across his face, his clothes were far too thin for the cold. The cold. Even through all her winter layers, Berd could feel the impossible chill emanating from her cousin's still form. Cold, so cold. But as she passed she would have sworn he swayed, ever so slightly, keeping his balance, keeping still while she passed. Keeping still until her back was turned. Wael. Wael! It was wrong to be so afraid of him. She breathed his name as she crept by, and saw her breath as a cloud.

If any of them breathed, their breath was as cold as the outer air.

Behind Wael was Isse, Sele's beautiful half-sister. Her head was raised and her white face—was it only the dusk that dusted her skin with blue?—looked ahead, eyes dark as shadows. She might have been seeing another place entirely, walking through another landscape, as if this statue of a woman in a summer dress had been stolen from a garden and put down all out of its place and time. Where did she walk to so intently? What landscape did she see with those lightless eyes?

And Baer was behind her, Berd's other cousin. He had been her childhood enemy, a plague on her friendship with Sele, and somehow because of it her most intimate friend, the one who knew her too well. His name jumped in Berd's throat. He stood too close to the wall for Berd to sidle by. She had to cross in front of him to the other wall and he *had* to see her, though his head, like Wael's, was lowered. He might have been walking alone, brooding a little, perhaps following Isse's footsteps or looking for

something he had lost. Berd stopped in front of him, trembling, caught between his cold and Isse's as if she stood between two impossible fires.

"Baer?" She hugged herself, maybe because that was as close as she dared come to sharing her warmth with him. "Oh, Baer."

But grief did not lessen her fear. It only made her fear—made *them*—more terrible. She had come too close. Baer could reach out, he only had to reach out . . . She fled, her sleeve scraping the wall, her boots battering the stairs. Down, down, moving too fast to be stopped by the terror of what else, what worse, the dark lobby might hold. Berd's breath gasped out, white even in the darkest spot by the door. It was very dark, and the dark was full of reaching hands. The door had no handle. It had swung closed. She was trapped. No. No. But all she could whisper, propitiation or farewell, was her cousin's name. "Baer . . ." *please don't forget you loved me.* "Baer . . ." *please don't do me harm.* Until in an access of terror she somehow wrenched open the door and sobbed out, feeling the cold of them at her back, "I'm sorry!" But even then she could not get away.

There was no street, no building across the way. There was no way, only a vast field of blue . . . blue . . . Berd might have been stricken blind for that long moment it took her mind to make sense of what her eyes saw. It was ice, the great ocean of ice that encircled the pole, as great an ocean as any in the world. Ice bluer than any water, as blue as the depthless sky. If death were a color it might be this blue, oh! exquisite and full of dread. Berd hung there, hands braced on the doorframe, as though to keep herself from being forced off the step. She forgot the cold ones upstairs; remembered them with a new jolt of fear; forgot them again as the bears came into view. The great white bears, denizens of the frozen sea, exiles on land when the spring drove the ice away. Exiles no more. They walked, slow and patient and seeming sad with their long heads nodding above the surface of the snow; and it seemed to Berd, standing in her impossible doorway—if she turned would she find the house gone and nothing left but this lintel, this doorstep, and these two jambs beneath her hands?—it seemed to her, watching the slow bears walk from horizon to blue horizon, that other figures walked with them, as white-furred as the bears, but two-legged and slight. She peered. She leaned out, her arms stretched behind her as she kept tight hold of her wooden anchors, not knowing anymore if it was fear that ached within her.

And then she felt on her shoulder the touch of a hand.

She fell back against the left-hand doorjamb, hung there, her feet clumsy as they found their new position. It was Baer, with Wael and Isse and others—yes, others!—crowding behind him in the lobby. The house was not empty and never had been, no more than a tomb is empty after the mourners have gone.

"Baer . . ."

Did he see her? He stood as if he would never move again, his hand outstretched as though to hail the bears, stop them, call them to come. He did not move, but in the moment that Berd stared at him, her heart failing and breath gone, the others had come closer. Or were they moved, like chess pieces by a player's hand? They were only *there*, close, close, so close the cold of them ate into Berd's flesh, threatening her bones with ice. Her throat clenched. A breath would have frozen her lungs. A tear would have frozen her eyes. At least the bears were warm inside their fur. She fell outside, onto the ice—

—onto the stoop, the first stair, her feet carrying her in an upright fall to the street. Yes: street, stairs, house. The door was swinging closed on the dark lobby, and there was nothing to see but the tall, shabby driftwood house and the brass doorknob rolling slowly, slowly to the edge of the stair. It did not fall. Shuddering with cold, Berd scoured her mittens across her ice-streaked face and fled, feeling the weight of the coming dark closing in behind her.

Dear Berd,

I am lonely here. Recent years have robbed me of too many friends. Do I seem older to you? I feel old sometimes, watching so many slip away from me, some through travel, some through death, some through simple, inevitable change. I feel that I have not changed, myself, yet that does not make me feel young. Older, if anything, as if I have stopped growing and have nothing left to me but to begin to die. I'm sorry. I am not morbid, only sad. But your coming is a great consolation to me. At last! Someone dear to me—someone dearer to me than anyone in the world—is coming towards me instead of leaving me behind. You are my cure for sorrow. Come soon . . .

Berd was too cold, she could not bear the prospect of canvassing the rest of Sele's old haunts. Old haunts! Her being rebelled. She ran until the air was like knives in her lungs, walked until the sweat threatened to freeze against her skin. She looked back as she turned corner after corner—no one, no one—but the fear and the grief never left her. Oh, Baer! Oh, Wael, and beautiful Isse! It was worse than being dead. Was it? Was it worse than being left behind? But Berd had not earned the grief of abandonment, no matter how close she was to stopping in the street and sobbing, bird-like, open-mouthed. She had no right. She was the one who was leaving.

At least, she was if she could find Sele. If she could only find him this once. This one last time.

She had known early on that it was love, on her part at least, but had been frequently bewildered as to what kind of love it was. Friendship, yes, but there was that lightness of heart at the first sight of him, the deep physical contentment in his rare embrace. She had envied his lovers, but had not been jealous of them. Had never minded sharing him with others, but had always been hurt when he vanished and would not be found. Love. She knew his lovers were often jealous of her. And Baer had often been jealous of Sele.

That had been love as well, Berd supposed. It was not indifference that made Berd look up in the midst of their scheming to see Baer watching her from across the room; but perhaps that was Baer's love, not hers. Baer's jealousy, that was not hers, and that frightened her, and bored her, and nagged at her until she felt sometimes he could pull her away from Sele, and from the warm candlelit conspiracy the five of them made, with a single skeptical glance. He had done it in their childhood, voicing the doubting realism that spoiled the game of make-believe. "You can't ride an ice bear," he had said—not even crushingly, but as flat and off-hand as a government form. "It would eat you," he said, and one of Berd and Isse's favorite games died bloody and broken-backed, leaving Baer to wonder in scowling misery why they never invited him to play.

Yet there he was, curled, it seemed deliberately, in Sele's most uncomfortable chair, watching, watching, as Sele, bright and quick by the fire, said, "Stories never die. You can't forget a story, not a real story, a living story. People forget, they die, but stories are always reborn. They're real. They're more real than we are."

"You can't live in a story," Baer said, and it seemed he was talking to Berd rather than Sele.

Berd said, "You can if you make the story real."

"That's right," Baer said, but as though he disagreed. "The story is ours. It only becomes real when we make it happen, and there has to be a way, a practical way—"

"We live in the story," Sele said. "Don't you see? *This* is a story. The story *is*."

"This is real life!" Baer mimed exasperation, but his voice was strained. "This story of yours is a *story*, you're just making it up. It's pure invention!"

"So is life," Sele said patiently. "That doesn't mean it isn't real."

Which was true; was, in fact, something Berd and Sele had argued into truth to-

gether, the two of them, alone. But Berd was dragged aside as she always was by Baer's resentful skepticism—resentful because of how badly he wanted to be convinced—but Berd could never find the words to include him in their private, perfect world, the world that would be perfect without him—and so somehow she could not perfectly immerse herself and was left on the margins, angry and unwilling in her sympathy for Baer. How many times had Berd lost Sele's attention, how many times had she lost her place in their schemes, because Baer was too afraid to commit himself and too afraid to abstain alone? Poor Baer! Unwilling, grudging, angry, but there it was: poor Baer.

And there he was, poor Baer, inside a cold, strange story, leaving Berd, for once, alone on the outside with Sele. With Sele. If only she were. *Oh Sele, where are you now?*

It seemed that the whole city, what was left of it, had moved into the outskirts where the aerodrome sprawled near the snow-blanked hills. There had been a few weeks last summer when the harbor was clear of ice and a great convoy of ships had docked all at once, creating a black cloud of smoke and a frantic holiday as supplies were unloaded and passengers loaded into the holds where the grain had been—loaded, it must be said, after the furs and ores that paid for their passage. Since then there had been nothing but the great silver airships drifting in on the southern wind, and now, as the cold only deepened with the passage of equinoctial spring, they would come no more. *Until,* it was said, *the present emergency has passed.* Why are some lies even told? Everyone knew this was the end of the city, the end of the north, perhaps the beginning of the end of the world. The last airships were sailing soon, too few to evacuate the city, too beautiful not to be given a gorgeous goodbye. So the city swelled against the landlocked shore of the aeroport like the Arctic's last living tide.

The first Berd knew of it—it had been an endless walk through the empty streets, the blue dusk hardly seeming to change, as if the whole city were locked in ice—was the glint and firefly glimmer of yellow light at the end of the wide suburban street. She had complained, they all had, about the brilliance of modern times, the constant blaze of gaslight that was challenged, these last few years, not by darkness but by the soulless glare of electricity. But now, tonight, Berd might have been an explorer lost for long months, drawing an empty sled and an empty belly into civilization with the very last of her strength. How beautiful it was, this yellow light. Alive with movement and color, it was an anodyne to grief, an antidote to blue. Her legs aching with her haste, Berd fled toward, yearning, rather than away, guilty and afraid. And then the light, and the noise, and the quicksilver movement of the crowd pulled her under.

It was a rare kind of carnival. More than a farewell, it was a hunt, every citizen a quarry that had turned on its hunter, Death, determined to take Him down with the hot blood bursting across its tongue. Strange how living and dying could be so hard to tell apart in the end. Berd entered into it at first like a swimmer resting on the swells, her relief at the lights that made the blue sky black, and at the warm-blooded people all around her steaming in the cold, made her buoyant, as light as an airship with a near approximation of joy. *This* was escape, oh yes it was. The big houses on their acre gardens spilled out into the open, as if the carpets and chandeliers of the rich had spawned tents and booths and roofless rooms. Lamps burned everywhere, and so did bonfires in which the shapes of furniture and books could still be discerned as they were consumed. The smells wafting in great clouds of steam from food carts and al fresco bistros made the sweet fluid burst into Berd's mouth, just as the music beating from all sides made her feet move to an easier rhythm than fear. They were alive here; she took warmth from them all. But what storerooms were emptied for this feast? Whose hands would survive playing an instrument in this cold?

The aerodrome's lights blazed up into the sky. Entranced, enchanted, Berd drifted through the crowds, stumbling over the broken walls that had once divided one man-

sion from the next. (The native-born foreigners had made gardens, as if tundra could be forced to become a lawn. No more. No more.) That glow was always before her, but never within reach. She stumbled again, and when she had stopped to be sure of her balance, she felt the weight of her exhaustion dragging her down.

"Don't stop." A hand grasped her arm above the elbow. "It's best to keep moving here."

Here? She looked to see what the voice meant before she looked to see to whom the voice belonged. "Here" was the empty stretch between the suburb and the aerodrome, still empty even now. Or perhaps even emptier, for there were men and dogs patrolling, and great lamps magnified by the lenses that had once equipped the lighthouses guarding the ice-locked coast. This was the glow of freedom. Berd stared, even as the hand drew her back into the celebrating, grieving, furious, abandoned, raucous crowd. She looked around at last, when the perimeter was out of view.

"Randolph!" she said, astonished at being able to put a name to the face. She was afraid—for one stopped breath she was helpless with fear—but he was alive and steaming with warmth, his pale eyes bright and his long nose scarlet with drink and cold. The combination was deadly, but Berd could believe he would not care.

"Little Berd," he said, and tucked her close against his side. With all their layers of clothing between them it was hardly presumptuous, though she did not know him well. He was, however, a crony of Sele's.

"You look like you've been through the wars," he said. "You need a drink and a bite of food."

And he needed a companion in his *fin de siècle* farewell, she supposed.

"The city's so empty," she said, and shuddered. "I'm looking for Sele. Randolph, do you know where he might be?"

"Not there," he said with a nod toward the aerodrome lights. "Not our Sele."

"No," Berd said, her eyes downcast. "But he'll be nearby. Won't he? Do you know?"

"Oh, he's around." Randolph laughed. "Looking for Sele! If only you knew how many women have come to me, wondering where he was! But maybe it's better you don't know, eh, little Berd?"

"I know," said little Berd. "I've known him longer that you."

"That's true!" Randolph said with huge surprise. He was drunker than she had realized. "You were pups together, weren't you, not so long ago. Funny to think . . . Funny to think, no more children, and the docks all empty where they used to play."

A maudlin drunk. Berd laughed, to think of the difference between what she had fled from and what had rescued her. All the differences. Yet Randolph had been born here, just the same as Wael and Isse and Baer.

"Do you know where I can find him, Randolph?"

"Sele?" He pondered, his narrow face drunken-sad. "Old Sele . . ."

"Only I need to find him tonight, Randolph. He has something for me, something I need. So if you can tell me . . . or you can help me look . . ."

"I know he's around. I know!" This with the tone of a great idea. "I know! We'll ask the Painter. Good ol' Painter! He knows where everyone is. Anyone who owes him money! And Sele's on that list, when was he ever not? We'll go find Painter, he'll set us right. Painter'll set us right."

So she followed the drunk who seemed to be getting drunker on the deepening darkness and the sharpening cold. The sky was indigo now, alight with stars above the field of lamps and fires and human lives. Fear receded. Anxiety came back all the sharper. Her last search, and she had only this one night, this one night, even if it had barely begun. And the thought came to her with a shock as physical as Baer's touch: it was spring: the nights were short, regardless of the cold.

She searched faces as they passed through fields of light. Strange how happy they

were. Music everywhere, bottles warming near the fires, a burst of fireworks like a fiery garden above the tents and shacks and mansions abandoned to the poor. Carnival time.

Berd had never known this neighborhood, it was too far afield even for the wandering Sele and her sometimes-faithful self. All she knew of it was this night, with the gardens invaded and the tents thrown open and spilling light and music and steam onto the trampled weeds and frozen mud of the new alleyways. They made small stages, their lamplit interiors as vivid as scenes from a play. Act IV, scene i: the Carouse. They were all of a piece, the Flirtation, the Argument, the Philosophical Debate. And yet, every face was peculiarly distinct, no one could be mistaken for another. Berd ached for them, these strangers camped at the end of the world. For that moment she was one of them, belonged to them and with them—belonged to everything that was not the cold ones left behind in the empty city beside the frozen sea. Or so she felt, before she saw Isse's face, round and cold and beautiful as the moon.

No. Berd's breath fled, but . . . no. There was only the firelit crowd outside, the lamplit crowd within the tent Randolph led her to, oblivious to her sudden stillness, the drag she made at the end of his arm. No cold Isse, no Wael or Baer. No. But the warmth of the tent was stifling, and the noise of music and voices and the clatter of bottle against glass shivered the bones of her skull.

The Painter held court, one of a hundred festival kings, in a tent that sagged like a circus elephant that has gone too long without food. He had been an artist once, and had earned the irony of his sobriquet by turning critic and making a fortune writing for twenty journals under six different names. He had traveled widely, of course—there wasn't enough art in the north to keep a man with half his appetites—but Berd didn't find it strange that he stayed when all his readers escaped on the last ships that fled before the ice. He had been a prince here, and some princes did prefer to die than become paupers in exile. Randolph was hard-pressed to force himself close enough to bellow in King Painter's ear, and before he made it—he was delayed more than once by an offered glass—Berd had freed her arm and drifted back to the wide-open door.

It seemed very dark outside. Faces passed on another stage, a promenade of drunks and madmen. A man dressed in the old-fashioned furs of an explorer passed by, his beard and the fur lining of his hood matted with vomit. A woman followed him wearing a gorgeous rug like a poncho, a hole cut in the middle of its flower-garden pattern, and another followed her with her party clothes torn all down her front, too drunk or mad to fold the cloth together, so that her breasts flashed in the lamplight from the tent. She would be dead before morning. So many would be, Berd thought, and her weariness came down on her with redoubled weight. A stage before her, a stage behind her, and she—less audience than stagehand, since these performers in no wise performed for her—stood in a thin margin of nowhere, a threshold between two dreams. She let her arms dangle and her head fall back, as if she could give up, not completely, but just for a heartbeat or two, enough to snatch one moment of rest. The stars glittered like chips of ice, blue-white, colder than the air. There was some comfort in the thought that they would still shine long after the human world was done. There would still be sun and moon, snow and ice, and perhaps the seals and the whales and the bears. Berd sighed and shifted her numb feet, thinking she should find something hot to drink, talk to the Painter herself. She looked down, and yes, there was Isse standing like a rock in the stream of the passing crowd.

She might have been a statue for all the notice anyone took of her. Passersby passed by without a glance or a flinch from Isse's radiating cold. It made Berd question herself, doubt everything she had seen and felt back at the house. She lifted her hand in a half-finished wave and felt an ache in her shoulder where Baer had touched her, the frightening pain of cold that has penetrated to the bone. Isse did not respond to Berd's gesture. She was turned a little from where Berd stood, her feet

frozen at the end of a stride, her body leaning toward the next step that never came. Still walking in that summer garden, her arms bare and as blue-white as the stars. Berd rubbed her shoulder, less afraid in the midst of carnival, though the ache of cold touched her heart. Dear Isse, where do you walk to? Is it beautiful there?

Something cold touched Berd's eye. Weeping ice? She blinked, and discovered a snowflake caught in her eyelashes. She looked up again. Stars, stars, more stars than she had seen moments ago, more stars than she thought she would see even if every gaslight and oil lamp and bonfire in the north were extinguished. Stars so thick there was hardly any black left in the sky, no matter how many fell. Falling stars, snow from a cloudless sky. Small flakes prickled against Berd's face, so much colder than her cold skin they felt hot. She looked down and saw that Baer and Wael had joined Isse, motionless, three statues walking down the impromptu street. How lonely they looked! Berd had been terrified in the house with them. Now she hurt for their loneliness, and felt an instant's powerful impulse to go to them, join them in their pilgrimage in whatever time and place they were. The impulse frightened her more than their presence did, and yet . . . And yet. She didn't move from the threshold of the tent, but the impulse still lived in her body, making her lean even as Isse leaned, on the verge of another step.

Snow fell more thickly, glittering in the firelight. It was strange that no one seemed to notice it, even as it dusted their heads and shoulders and whitened the ground. It fell more thickly, a windless blizzard that drew a curtain between Berd and the stage of the promenade, and more thickly still, until it was impossible that so much snow could fall—and from a starlit sky!—and yet she was still able to see Wael and Baer and Isse. It was as though they stood not in the street but in her mind. She was shivering, her mouth was dry. Snow fell and fell, an entire winter of snow pouring into the street, the soft hiss of the snowflakes deafening Berd to the voices, music, clatter and bustle of the tent behind her. It was the hiss of silence, no louder than the sigh of blood in her ears. And Isse, Wael, and Baer walked and walked, unmoving while the snow piled up in great drifts, filling the street, burying it, disappearing it from view. There were only the three cold ones and the snow.

And then the snow began to generate ghosts. Berd knew this trick from her childhood, when the autumn winds would drive fogbanks and snowstorms onto the northern shore. The hiss and the monotonous whiteness gave birth to muttered voices and distant calls, and to the shapes of things barely visible behind the veil of mist or snow. People, yes, and animals like white bears and caribou and the musk oxen Berd only knew from the books they read in school; and sometimes stranger things, ice gnomes like white foxes walking on hind legs and carrying spears, and wolves drawing sleds ridden by naked giants, and witches perched backwards on white caribou made of old bones and snow. Those ghosts teased Berd's vision as they passed down the street of snow, a promenade of the north that came clearer and clearer as she watched, until the diamond points of the gnomes' spears glittered in the lamplight pouring out of the tent and the giants with their eyes as black as the sky stared down at her as they passed. Cold filled her, the chill of wonder, making her shudder. And now she saw there were others walking with the snow ghosts, people as real as the woman who wore the beautiful carpet, as solid as the woman who bared her breasts to the cold. They walked in their carnival madness, as if they had stumbled their way through the curtain that had hidden them from view. Still they paid no notice to the three cold ones, the statues of Baer and Isse and Wael, but they walked there, fearless, oblivious, keeping pace with the witches, the oxen, the bears.

And then Randolph grasped Berd's sore shoulder with his warm hand and said, "Painter says Sele's been sleeping with some woman in one of the empty houses . . . Hey, where'd everybody go?"

For at his touch the snow had been wiped away like steam from a window, and all the ghosts, all the cold ones, and all the passersby were gone, leaving Berd standing at the edge of an empty stage.

"Hey," Randolph said softly. "Hey."

It was perfectly silent for a moment, but only for a moment. A fire burning up the street sent up a rush of sparks as a new log went on. A woman in the tent behind them screamed with laughter. A gang of children ran past, intent in their pursuit of some game. And then the promenade was full again, as varied and lively as a parade.

Berd could feel Randolph's shrug and his forgetting through the hand resting on her shoulder. She could feel his warmth, his gin-soaked breath past her cheek, his constant swaying as he sought an elusive equilibrium. She should not feel so alone, so perfectly, utterly, dreadfully alone. They had gone, leaving her behind.

"No." No. *She* was the one who was leaving.

"Eh?" Randolph said.

"Which house?" Berd said, turning at last from the door.

"Eh?" He swayed more violently, his eyes dead, lost in some alcoholic fugue.

"Sele." She shook him, and was surprised by the stridency in her voice. "Sele! You said he was in a house with some woman. Which house?"

Randolph focused with a tangible effort. "That's right. Some rich woman who didn't want to go with her husband. Took Sele up. Lives somewhere near here. One of the big houses. Some rich woman. Bitch. If I'd been her I'd've gone. I'd've been dead by now. Gone. I'd've been gone by now . . ."

Berd forced her icy hands to close around both his arms, holding him against his swaying. "Which house? Randolph! *Which house?*"

My dearest Berd,

I'm embarrassed by the last letter I wrote. It must have given you a vision of me all alone in a dusty room, growing old before my time. Not true! Or, if it is, it isn't the only truth. I should warn you that I have been extolling your virtues to everyone I know, until all of my acquaintance is agog to meet the woman, the mysterious northerner, the angel whose coming has turned me into a boy again. You are my birthday and my school holiday and my summer all rolled into one, and I cannot wait to parade you on my arm. Will it embarrass you if I buy you beautiful things to wear? I hope it won't. I want shamelessly to show you off. I want you to become the new star of my almost-respectable circle as you are the star that lights the dark night of my heart . . .

4198 Goldport Avenue.

There *were* no avenues, just the haphazard lanes of the carnival town, but the Painter (Berd had given up on Randolph in the end) had added directions that took into account new landmarks and gave Berd some hope of finding her way. Please, oh please, let Sele be there.

"It's a monstrous place," the Painter had said. His eyes were greedy, unsated by the city's desperation, hungry for hers. "A bloody great Romantic pile with gargoyles like puking birds and pillars carved like tree nymphs. You can't miss it. Last time I was there it was lit up like an opera house with a red carpet spilling down the stairs. Vulgar! My god, the woman has no taste at all except for whiskey and men. Your Sele will be lucky if she's held onto him this long."

His eyes had roved all over Berd, but there was nothing to see except her weary face and frightened eyes. He dismissed her, too lazy to follow her if she wouldn't oblige by bringing her drama to him, and Randolph was so drunk by then that he stared with sober dread into the far distance, watching the approach of death. Berd went alone into the carnival, feeling the cold all the more bitterly for the brief

warmth of the Painter's tent. Her hands and feet felt as if they were being bitten by invisible dogs, her ears burned with wasp-fire, her shoulder ached with a chill that grew roots down her arm and into the hollow of her ribs. Cold, cold. Oh, how she longed for warmth! Warmth and sunshine and smooth pavement that didn't trip her hurting feet, and the proper sounds of spring, waves and laughter and shouting gulls, rather than the shouting crowd, yelping as though laughter were only a poor disguise for a howl of despair. She stumbled, buffeted by strangers, and wished she could only *see*, if she could only *see*. But Wael and Isse and Baer were near. She knew that, even in the darkness; heard their silence in the gaps and blank spaces of the noisy crowd, felt their cold. And oh, she was frightened. She missed them terribly, grieved for them, longed for them, and was terrified that longing would bring them back to her, as cold and strange and wrong as the walking dead.

But she would not go that way, not that way, she would not.

Berd stumbled again. Under her feet, barely visible in the light of a bonfire ringed by dancers, there lay a street sign that said in ornate script Goldport Ave. She looked up, past the dancers and their fire—and what was that in the flames? A chair stood upright in the coals and on the chair an effigy, please let it be an effigy, burning down to a charcoal grin—she dragged her gaze up above the fire where the hot air shivered like a watery veil, and saw the pillared house with all its curtains open to expose the shapes dancing beneath the blazing chandeliers. Bears and giants and witches, and air pilots and buccaneers and queens. Fancy dress, as if the dancers had already died and moved on to a different form. Berd climbed the stairs, the vulgar carpet more black than red after the passage of many feet, and passed through the wide-open door.

She gave up on the reception rooms very soon. They were so hot, and crowded by so many reckless dancing drunks, and the music was a noisy shambles played by more drunks who seemed to have only a nodding acquaintance with their instruments. Perhaps the dancers and the musicians had traded places for a lark. Berd thought that even were she drunk and in the company of friends it would still seem like a foretaste of hell, and she could feel a panic coming on before she had forced a way through a single room. Sele. Sele! Why wouldn't he come and rescue her? She fought her way back into the grand foyer and climbed the wide marble stairs until she was above the heads of the crowd. Hot air mingled with cold. Lamps dimmed as the oil in the reservoirs ran low, candles guttered in ornate pools of wax; no one seemed to care. They would all die here, a mad party frozen in place like a story between the pages of a book. Berd sat on a step halfway above the first landing and put her head in her hands.

"There you are. Do you know, I thought I'd missed you for good."

Berd burst into tears. Sele sat down beside her and rocked her, greatcoat and all, in his arms.

He told her he had waited on the esplanade until his feet went numb. She told him about the suicide. She wanted to tell him about his sister, Isse, and her cousins, but could not find the words to begin.

"I saw," she said, "I saw," and spilled more tears.

"It isn't a tragedy," Sele said, meaning the suicide. "We all die, soon or late. It's just an anticipation, that's all."

"I know."

"There are worse things."

"I know."

He drew back to look at her. She looked at him, and saw that he knew, and that he saw that she knew, too.

"Oh, Sele . . ."

His round brown face was solemn, but also serene. "Are you still going?"

"Yes!" She shifted so she could grasp him too. "Sele, you have to come with me. You must, now, you have no choice."

He laughed at her with surprise. "What do you mean? Why don't I have a choice?"

"They—" She stammered, not wanting to know what she was trying to say. "Th-they have been following me, Wael and Baer and Isse. They've been following. They want— They'll come for you, too."

"I know. I've seen them. I expect they'll come soon."

"I'm sorry. I know it's wrong, but they frighten me so much. How can you be so calm?"

"We did this," he said. "We wanted change, didn't we? We asked for it. We should take what we get."

"Oh, Sele." Berd hid her face against his shoulder. He was only wearing a shirt, she realized. She could feel the chill of his flesh against her cheek. She whispered, "I can't. It's too dreadful. I can't bear to always be so cold."

"Oh, little Berd." He stroked her hair. "You don't have to. I've made my choice, that's all, and you've made yours. I don't think, by now, there's any right or wrong either way. We've gone too far for that."

She shook her head against him. She wanted very much to plead with him, to make her case, to spin for him all her dreams of the south, but she was too ashamed, and knew that it would do no good. They had already spun their dreams into nothing, into cold and ice, into the land beyond death. Anyway, Sele had never, ever, in all their lives, followed her lead. And at the last, she could not follow his.

They pulled apart.

"Come on," Sele said. "I have your things in my room."

The gas jet would not light, so Berd stood by the door while Sele fumbled for candle and match. Two candles burning on a branch meant for four barely carved the shape of the room out of the darkness. It seemed very grand to Berd, with heavy curtains round the bed and thick carpets on the floor.

"A strange place to end up," she said.

Sele glanced at her, his dark eyes big and bright with candlelight. "It's warm," he said, and then added ruefully, "It was warm. Anyway, I needed to be around to meet some of the right people. It's such a good address, don't you know."

"Better than your old one." Berd couldn't smile, remembering his old house, remembering the street sign under her feet and the shape in the bonfire outside.

"Anyway." Sele knelt and turned up a corner of the carpet. "My hostess is nosy but not good at finding things. And she's been good to me. I owe her a lot. She helped me get you what you'll need."

"The ticket?" Berd did not have enough room for air in her chest.

"Ticket." Sele handed her the items one at a time. "Travel papers. Letters."

"Letters?" She was slow to take the last packet. Whose letters? Letters from whom?

"From your sponsor. There's a rumor that even with a ticket and papers they won't let you on board unless you can prove you aren't going south only to end up a beggar. Your sponsor is supposed to give you a place to stay, help you find work. He's my own invention, but he's a good one. No," he said as she turned the packet over in her hands, "don't read them now. You'll have time on the ship."

It was strange to see her name on the top envelope in Sele's familiar hand. He had never written her a letter in her life. She stowed them away in her pocket with the other papers and then checked, once, twice, that she had everything secure. *I can't go*. The words lodged in her throat. She looked at Sele, all her despair—at going? at staying?—in her eyes.

"You're right to go," Sele said. "Little Berd, flying south away from the cold."

"I don't want to leave you." Not *I can't,* just *I don't want to.*

"But you will."

She shivered, doubting, torn, and yet knowing as well as he that he was right. She would go, and he would go too, on a different journey with Isse and Wael and Baer. So cold. She hugged him fiercely, trying to give him her heat, wanting to borrow his. He kissed her, and then she was going, going, her hand in her pocket, keeping her ticket safe. Running down the stairs. Finding the beacon of the aerodrome even before she was out the door.

Out the door. On the very threshold she looked out and saw what she had not thought to look for from the window of Sele's room. Inside the masquerade party was in full swing, hot and bright and loud with voices and music and smashing glass. Outside . . .

Outside the ice had come.

It was as clear as it can be only at the bottom of a glacier, where the weight of a mile of ice has pressed out all the impurities of water and air. It was as clear as glass, as clear as the sky, so that the stars shone through hardly dimmed, though their glittering was stilled. Berd could see everything, the carnival town frozen with every detail preserved: the tents still upright, though their canvas sagged; the shanties with the soot still crusted around their makeshift chimneys. Even the bonfires, with their half-burnt logs intact, their charcoal facsimiles of chairs and books and mannequins burned almost to the bone. In the glassy starlight Berd could even see all the little things strewn across the ground, all the ugly detritus of the end of the world, the bottles and discarded shoes, the dead cats and dead dogs and turds. And she could see the people, all the people abandoned at the last, caught in their celebratory despair. The whole crowd of them, men and women and children, young and old and ugly and fair, frozen as they danced, stumbled, fucked, puked, and died. And, yes, there were her own three, her own dears, the brothers and sister of her heart, standing at the foot of the steps as if they had been caught, too, captured by the ice just as they began to climb. Isse, and Wael, and Baer.

The warmth of the house behind Berd could not combat the dreadful cold of the ice. The music faltered as the cold bit the musicians' hands. Laughter died. And yet, and yet, and yet in the distance, beyond the frozen tents and the frozen people, a light still bloomed. Cold electricity, as cold as the unrisen moon and as bright, so that it cast the shadows of Baer and Wael and Isse before them up the stairs. The aerodrome, yes, the aerodrome, where the silver airships still hung from their tethers like great whales hanging in the depths of the clear ocean blue. Yes, and there was room at the right-hand edge of the stairs where Berd could slip between the balustrade and the still summer statue of Wael, her cousin Wael, with his hair shaken back and his dark eyes raised to where Berd still stood with her hand in her pocket, her ticket and travel pass and letters clutched in her cold but not yet frozen fist. The party was dying. There was a quiet weeping. The lights were growing dim. *Now or never*, Berd thought, and she took all her courage in her hands and stepped through the door.

My darling, my beloved Berd,

I wish I had the words to tell you how much I love you. It's no good to say "like a sister" or "like a lover" or "like myself." It's closer to say like the sun that warms me, like the earth that supports me, like the air I breathe. And I have been suffering these past few days with the regret (I know I swore long ago to regret nothing, even to remember *nothing I might regret, but it finds me all the same) that I have never come to be with you, your lover or your husband, in your beloved north. It's as though I have consigned myself to some sunless, airless world. How have I let all this time pass without ever coming to you? And now it is too late, far too late for me. But I am paid with this interminable waiting. Come to me soon, I beg you. Save me from my folly. Forgive me. Tell me you love me as much as I love you . . .* ○

NIGHTLIFE

She had a certain primness,
a masticular, mandibular tightness,
as if she were always on the verge
of correcting your pronoun agreement
but was holding herself back.
And then it came to her one night.
An incubus or succubus,
she could have handled—
her virginal days were far behind—
but a syllabus was a problem
of a whole different magnitude,
insinuating itself through
her auricular cavity, haunting her dreams,
a commalingual seduction.
She was the direct and indirect object
of its attentions. It coordinated
and subordinated her, forcing
her to experience dependence
and independence, cyclical states
elaborated by soft explosions of breath,
a heightening awareness of interjections,
the intercourse of discourse, multiple
ejaculations, a consuming passion.
When periods stopped, she imagined
pregnant pauses and, exhausted, could
have slipped into a commatose state
except for her stubborn resilience,
but finally it all came together.
She emerged victorious, a semester's
Remedial English all planned.

—Sandra Lindow

SLOW STAMPEDE

Sara Genge

In addition to working all-night shifts as a doctor in Madrid, Sara Genge writes speculative fiction for the sleepless mind. Her work has appeared in Strange Horizons, Apex Digest, Transcriptase.org, Cosmos Magazine, and other venues. It might be a good idea to approach her second story for *Asimov's* well rested, since some of its images could warp your dreams.

Raj lay prone on the canoe and stared at the horizon through the binoculars he'd stolen in the previous raid, careful to keep them shadowed with his hand. The second sun was about to set and the reddish light coming off the edge of the Tigahili Swamp threatened to reflect off the glass and give him away to the approaching caravan.

The first Swamp Elephants were barely visible with the naked eye, but, with the binoculars, he could see their legs moving in slow but gigantic strides. From the distance, they looked like Jesus-bugs skimming the mud, but Raj knew that they stood taller than the sequoias that anchored their roots hundreds of yards under the surface. The swampiphant's legs pierced the upper layers of silt, finding purchase further down as the mud served to stabilize their tremendous height. In Eldora's low gravity, animals grew tall, but the inertia of the swampiphant's mass had to be kept in check and mud did the job.

The caravan was well loaded and Raj grinned, thinking of the spoils. His trained eyes scanned the animals, gauging which would bellow, which would run. Normally, the last thing a bandit wanted was to start a slow stampede when he boarded a caravan, but Raj wasn't in a normal mood. Last week, the Chief had made Raj and his mother sit in the sun for an hour while he talked to the old men of the council. Raj had not objected, but it had made him realize that maybe the Chief wasn't the best person to lead the village. He didn't have an heir and that meant that if he died, any young man could be Chief. Didn't the Chief understand that the future of the marsh town lay not in wilted old fools but in the strong arms of people like Raj? It was time for change, and slow stampedes were dangerous. People could get killed in a slow stampede. Raj only needed to find the right animal.

He spotted a she-swampiphant carrying too much load. He could tell by the way her legs sunk into the mud below the knee. Maybe that was why she was skittish, but then swampiphant drivers tended to overload the animals they liked the least and fawn on the ones who behaved. Not clever, but typical. It would be easy to convince the Chief to go for that one. After all, the man who boarded the animal got the first pick, and she was the swampiphant with the biggest cargo.

Raj's job was done; he should return to camp before night set in and the Merpeo-

ple came out to hunt, but he stayed a little longer, letting his gaze linger on the mounts. For other men, it was all about the chase and the money. For Raj, it was about the swampiphants themselves. He loved their graceful strides. Each time an animal lifted a webbed foot, mud flew out in a parabola, lingering in the air for a few seconds until Eldora's light pull nudged it back to the ground. From where Raj was, the scene was serene and majestic, but he knew that things would get a lot dirtier once the swampiphants were closer and started spraying gobs of muck all over the place. More than one canoe had been sunk in this way.

He turned the canoe around and hand-paddled toward camp. After lying still for so long, it was a pleasure to exert the muscles in his back. Like all bandits, he had wide shoulders from paddling and grey-brown skin that made him invisible against the mud. His hair was darker than his skin and he kept it cropped short for freedom of movement. Around him, head-sized tulips were beginning to emerge from the half meter of water that covered the Swamp. He was thirsty and brought some of the murky water to his lips. Straining was for women.

Raj's mother bathed him on the porch. She made him turn around more than was necessary, probably hoping that the young girls peeping out from the shadows would like what they saw.

"Any girl is better than no girl."

He was used to his mother nagging, but today she wasn't content simply expounding the virtues of marriage. Her voice dropped and she said something new. "You can't be Chief if you don't have a wife to bear your children."

Raj froze. Some things were best left unspoken, but hushing her was out of the question. The respect he owed his mother forbade him from saying anything.

His mother held his face up and applied the washcloth to his ears.

"It's true, Raj. You never listen to me, but you must hear this. A Chief without an heir is an accident waiting to happen. Get married and make babies while you're young and strong and can protect them."

His mother helped him dress and he wrapped himself in a blanket and sat on the porch.

"I'll tell Fana tomorrow that you've had hair on your chest for five years. Her daughter is older than you, but you are wise enough for an older wife."

Raj stared at her in surprise. She was going to marry him off! She'd talked about marriage for years, but now she was going to marry him, and to Fana's daughter no less.

"Not Fana's daughter," he grunted. It was undignified for a man to complain and arguing back at one's mother was just not done, but she was taking things too far.

His mother sighed. "There aren't many girls your age in the village, Raj. Thaina, Lea, and Baja are too old for you; Alesa and Tee are your cousins . . ."

"Alesa is only my second cousin," Raj said.

"Double second cousin. I won't have deformed grandchildren. What would people say? That your old mother wasn't careful when she married her son, that's what."

"What if we wait? Laitha is bound to get her menses any time now," he whispered.

She squeezed his shoulder. "The Chief is getting too old to wait."

Raj fumed. Tomorrow he would be Chief! What did it matter if he wasn't married? He'd organize a raid on a neighboring village to get a wife, or wait for Laitha to become a woman if he so chose. He was certain he could keep the men at bay until he had an heir who was of age.

His mother went inside to cook. From the porch, he saw the tulips bloom. The marsh became peppered in red. A high-pitched sound filled the air. The hummingbirds were out, dipping proboscides the size of newborns into the open cups of the tulips and batting their wings at a hundred beats per second. Raj thought of shoot-

ing one down, but they had meat for dinner and he would have had to paddle far to retrieve the body before it sank. His mother would scold him if he was late.

The sun was setting. For a second, as it disappeared under the edge of the World, there was a ray of green light. The tulips twitched, as if flinching, and in spite of himself, Raj let out a hearty hoot. It amused him that the flowers could be frightened of something that happened twice a day. Raj himself wasn't afraid of anything.

He awoke to the sound of a birdcall. The caravan was close and the vibration of the swampiphant's strides transmitted to the village. The hut undulated gently under him, swayed by the sluggish waves in the mud.

Raj's mother nodded and set his breakfast in front of him. Raj was thankful for the quiet. She washed the dishes carefully, making sure they didn't clink. Sound carried too well. At this distance, the village need not only be invisible, but inaudible too.

He went to the porch and dropped on his belly so he could scoop up handfuls of the slime. His mother helped him spread it on his back and arms while he worked on his face.

Other men were making their way to their canoes. Raj exchanged a few hand signs with the Chief. He was careful to mention the testy swampiphant, the one that was overloaded. He explained that it was his duty to warn the Chief against that animal. The Chief wasn't so young any more and shouldn't risk bodily harm. He made sure other men witnessed the conversation.

They went east. The caravan was coming toward them, but, preferring to attack it from the rear, they detoured, taking the long way around.

Here and there, speckled in the mud, Raj saw glints of nacre skin and wriggling flippers. The fight would be bloody, and Merpeople never turned down a free meal. He held his knife ready in case the Mer got impatient, but none of them risked losing a limb by coming too close to his canoe.

The caravan was well protected. The flexible stairladders that were normally wrapped around the swampiphant's hind legs had been removed and the crew used lengths of rope to get up and down the beasts. It made climbing uncomfortable, but it also made the swampiphants more difficult to attack.

Launching a caravan across the swamp was expensive, but worth the risk if the caravan made it to the Golden Continent to trade. Gauging how many fighters to send was difficult. Too few and the caravan would be taken. Too many and the costs rose exponentially. The merchants never traveled with the caravan, so their only interest was in protecting their assets. They counted on losing caravans now and then. After all, the saying went, *three caravans: one to sink, one to rob, and one to make it back with gold*.

Raj guessed this one was the one to rob.

The bandits allowed their canoes to drift under the animals as if they were debris floating in the swamp currents. Raj stirred gently toward the swampiphant he'd singled out and positioned his canoe as if to board her.

MOVING?

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The Chief ordered him back with a birdcall and rushed toward the animal. Fine. Let the Chief have her. Nobody could say Raj wasn't obedient.

Instead, he approached the animal to her right. It was a young bull, strong and a good catch. The beast lifted its hind leg, sending muck flying. The leg descended ten yards in front of him, slowly piercing the mud, sheer mass battling the resistance of the deeper, denser layers. Raj held his breath and waited for the other legs to move. Finally, the swampiphant raised its hind leg again, and as the hole it vacated filled with water, the whirlpool drew Raj's canoe toward the animal. Before that lazy leg could lift off, Raj jumped, wrapping his arms and legs around the slippery hoof. Up he went, digging his knees in for purchase. The leg soared, hovered, and started to descend. In a few seconds it would plummet and Raj would be buried alive with it. Raj pulled his body up, reaching the crevice of the knee just as the leg sank in the mire.

Around him, other men were similarly positioned. Raj grinned when he saw the Chief struggling to keep hold, his belly resting in a wrinkle of the swampiphant's skin. So far, the caravan guards hadn't noticed them. Raj started massaging the swampiphant behind the knee, and pretty soon, the animal was swatting at him, beating Raj on the head and arms with its bristly tail. Raj turned around, and the next time he saw that tail approaching, he leapt, grabbing onto it for dear life. The tail swung up into the air and the swampiphant bellowed. Bye, bye stealth. Raj roared as he let go, gently falling a couple of yards onto the swampiphant's back. He landed on his feet, kicked a guard overboard, threw his knife at a second one and broke a third's neck before the first one had a chance to splash. He yanked the reins out of the driver's hands, dug an elbow into his belly and pulled hard. He didn't like leaving the driver alive behind him, but it was imperative he keep control of the swampiphant. Other animals reared and threw their mounts. The Merpeople would be happy today.

"Whoa!" Raj roared and a shriek told him the barbs on the bit had found the tender flesh in the animal's gums. In direct contradiction to his verbal order, he pulled sharply toward the left, directing the swampiphant toward the animal the Chief was on. He hated hurting a swampiphant, but it was now or never. He dug his left knee into the swampiphant's neck and planted his right heel firmly behind the animal's ear.

"Whoa! Whoa," Raj said, "What'd they feed you? Dratted animal." The swampiphant lurched, trembled in confusion and gored the Chief's animal.

Raj shouted the way a man would if he had been in a terrible accident. He struggled to regain control of the maddened animal.

"Whoa!" This time he pulled straight on the reins so that the animal would stop, but the swampiphant was confused and hurt. It lowed and dipped its head, almost throwing Raj overboard, and lurched to the right. It jumped, and for a second, Raj was flying parallel with the swampiphant. He pulled on the reins to get back on his mount, but this only annoyed the animal further. They landed with a rumble, the displaced mud rippling off for miles. Then the swampiphant started to run. Raj turned around, but there was no way to get off. His canoe was buried, yards below. The other swampiphants took off in every direction. The slow stampede had started and Raj was impotent to stop it.

Raj let go of the reins. He was drenched in sweat and his muscles trembled from exertion. He could hardly stand on his feet. The swampiphant had finally given up and was grazing, trunk inserted deep into the rich organic mud.

He was inspecting the cargo, trying to find water, when a dead weight dropped on his back and something roared in his ear. Raj collapsed and felt steel pressed against his throat. Damn, he had forgotten about the driver!

"Now, get up slowly and don't try anything funny."

Raj smiled. By letting him stand up, his opponent had given up his advantage. Raj

had killed many men and a knife wielded by a city-dweller wasn't going to stop him.

Frightened eyes stared at him through the turban that covered the driver's face. One look and Raj knew the eyes belonged to a woman. He laughed. A woman in a caravan? Was she trying to get kidnapped? Maybe it was a thing with her.

"Don't move," the girl said, taking a trembling step forward. A tiny hand gripped the huge knife and it didn't look like she knew what to do with it. Raj dropped into a crouch, ready to leap, but the girl took a couple of steps back and dove into the cargo. Raj went after her and an arrow whistled past his ear.

He hit the deck.

She came up from among the coffers and tore the scarf from her face. There was a crossbow in her hand.

"Listen," she said with a shaky voice, "I don't want to hurt you." Raj winced at the weakness in that statement. "If you don't hurt me, I'll let you keep the swampiphant and some of the cargo."

"What's to stop me from taking it all?"

"I have this." She gestured with the weapon.

Raj whistled.

"Yes, there's always that." Raj sat up slowly and the girl kept the crossbow trained on him. The swampiphant ate noisily. In the east, the first sun was starting to set.

After a while, Raj leaned backward into a bale of silks.

"How long are we going to sit here?"

"Until I can trust you."

"Listen, lady. I attack caravans for a living. You can't trust me. Shoot me and be done with it."

"No."

"You can't shoot me, can you? City people can't shoot worth a damn. Are you scared you'll miss or are you scared you'll kill me?"

"I can shoot."

"Really? That's a big weapon you have there. I haven't seen one that big in years. Chief's got one, but he doesn't bring it on caravan hunts. You can't climb a swampiphant with big crossbows like that." Raj wondered why he was talking so much. His palms were sweating and he was tired of sitting around.

"Have you ever held a crossbow before? Is it nice?" he asked.

"Very."

"You can't shoot me. I bet you couldn't kill a gnat. Aw, get off it, we are what we are. Now," Raj stood up and stepped forward, "give me that before you hurt yourself."

Raj felt the arrow sear into his right arm, his good arm, dammit, his knife-throwing arm. He staggered forward, but his vision clouded and he fell. As he collapsed he realized the swampiphant's skin wasn't coming up to meet him. He was falling overboard and he was as good as dead.

"Don't dangle your worm in the water, boy-human, a fish might bite it." The mermaid snickered, baring glistening teeth. Raj's head hurt and his arm was on fire. He looked around. He was stuck. Water lapped at his chest and he could feel the mud's suction working on his knees.

The mergirl came closer to inspect him. Silt dripped down her arms and her milky skin shone under the rays of sunset. Iridescent scales inched down her neck, and flippers protruded from her arms and chest. Her fins undulated with the viscous waves. She dipped her head undermud to breathe and re-emerged closer to Raj.

"You're lost, boy-man. I wonder what your bones taste like. No offense, but I'm carrying and a pregnant girl needs bones to make strong shells for her eggs." She chattered her teeth, making a sound like nails on bone. A shiver ran down Raj's spine be-

fore he could stop it. The swampiphant loomed above, yards high and unreachable. Raj tried to pull his right leg up, but his left leg sank in deeper. He wasn't afraid, he told himself. Raj was never afraid of anything.

"On the other hand, boy-man, if you behave, I might not eat you." She winked and paddled playfully. Her head sunk under the muck, and bubbles tickled Raj's chest.

"My name is Raj, not boy-man," he said, wondering why he bothered. He tried to move back, but the mud held him tight. He wondered if he should call the swampiphant, but would it come? He feared that if he so much as moved, the mermaid would dispatch him with a blow from her tail.

"Oh, oh, oh, oh. You're a clever one." The mergirl chortled, dragging webbed fingers down Raj's chest. "I knew a clever man once. He called himself a sci-en-tist. The Maharaja of Pu-teh asked him to make him pretty creatures to keep in his aquarium. He had read all about mermaids, you see, and he wanted some of his own . . ." The mergirl wriggled around him, surrounding Raj in wet fingers and shiny scales. Her skin was cold, and when she moved fast, the scales bit into his flesh and stung.

"He was smart, that sci-en-tist, but not smart enough. He fell into the tank. So tasty. I wonder if it comes with the smarts. What do you think, boy-man, are you as tasty as that sci-en-tist?"

"Please," Raj whimpered.

The mermaid grabbed his hair and sniffed it. "Grey skin," she mumbled. "The Maharajah had grey skin too. Just for that, I should kill you."

"Don't . . ." He struggled to keep himself sharp despite the fear and pain but his voice came out raw. "I'm sure there's some arrangement we can make."

"Ah, yes. You are a lucky man, Raj. Lucky that I am a reasonable person and that I think you're more useful alive." She fingered the wound on his shoulder.

Raj moaned when she plucked the arrow from his flesh. She bit the tip off, rolled it around her mouth and spat it out as if it were a pit from some fruit that was juicy and sweet. "Give me what I want and I'll give you the World. My brothers and sisters are talking undermud." She dipped her head as if to prove her point. "Yes, they agree. Say the word and your Chief will have an accident."

Raj tensed. Treason was a double-edged sword which he hadn't planned on sharing.

"He's alive?"

"He fell from his mount. My people have him. What happens if Chief dies, Raj? Who do you think is prepared to lead the village? Who has the courage, the strength," she pinched his nipple, drawing blood, "to keep the village together?"

"What's in it for you?" he asked. He would agree to anything, but he wasn't about to let her see that. The girl's hands reached into his breeches.

"Peace with bandits. A truce among brigands. You'll be my corsair. I'll leave you and your people alone in exchange for some gold and a few morsels. Throw them down to us alive, we like that." She sank her head underwater. "Oh, and stop hacking at us. We want our children to be able to play close to the surface."

Her mouth on his member was cold, but Raj couldn't help throwing his head back and gasping.

Raj pulled up his breeches. He was glad that the mud held him up; he didn't know if he would still be standing otherwise. He could feel it climbing up his thighs and he knew he'd never get free on his own. His vision blurred and he leaned forward. The mermaid held him upright with a hand to his neck and looked at him with amusement. Raj felt dozens of tiny fish nibbling at his legs.

"So, have you made up your mind?" she said. She sank her head, listening for sounds only she could hear. Raj didn't pay attention—he was semi-conscious at best—and the fish bites grew more insistent.

"My people say they have an agreement with Chief. They want me to kill you. Did you know that Chief has been wary of you for months? You're not too subtle, Raj."

"No!" It took a tremendous effort just to say it. He gasped, trying to gather his wits together. His eyes opened sluggishly. "He won't keep your bargain."

"Ah, and you would? You're a proven traitor. You shouldn't let your mother talk like that. We've got good hearing." She came closer, splashing her tail and showing off her teeth.

"Wait!" Raj grunted. "Chief is old. If it's not me, someone else will get rid of him. Your agreement will be useless once Chief dies."

The mermaid nodded.

"You can think. Good for you. I'll tell the others." The mermaid pressed in and lapped the blood from his wound. "That should keep it clean," she whispered, and disappeared undermud.

Seconds crawled by. Raj's shoulder burned from the chemicals in the mermaid's saliva, but little by little he started to regain his strength. A surge of heat traveled down his shoulder toward his torso and Raj gasped as his brain became lucid enough to appreciate the full extent of his pain. He wondered if she would come back. Sometimes, the Mer didn't bother to kill their victims before eating them. The nibbles on his legs seemed to him like a thousand merbabies, hungry and ready to test their teething mouths against his flesh.

He tried to twist around to see if there were Mer behind him. He hated the thought that they might be spying on him, even gloating amongst themselves undermud. Nobody made fun of Raj.

When the mergirl re-emerged Raj noticed the sun had hardly moved. It had seemed an eternity to him.

"It's done," she told him.

"Is he dead?" he asked.

"And delicious."

Raj cringed. "Get me out of here."

The mermaid wrapped her arms around his armpits and started pulling. She leaned in close to his ear and her musky breath tickled the hairs on Raj's neck.

"Remember what I did to you down there?" She patted his crotch. "Never forget it. No matter what you do, you will always have my mouth around your thing, and believe me; I'd love to bite it off.

"If you betray us, we will kill you. We will start with your mother, and then we'll kill your friends. If you have children, we'll make sure none of them survives to adulthood. Your line will end with you, if you betray us."

"Oh God, thank God!" the driver said when the swampiphant lifted Raj up with its trunk and placed him on its head. The mermaid had told him that many swampiphants had been trained as loggers before being sold to the caravans, and had taught him the command to tell the swampiphant to lift him up like this. It was a useful trick. Raj would remember it.

"I thought you were dead!" the girl said. She was terribly excited, laughing and crying at the same time.

Raj commiserated. If he hadn't come back, she would have surely died. She didn't have provisions for the month-long journey to the nearest city and even if she did, she probably didn't know how to get there. That's what caravan leaders were for—drivers only drove.

He hoped she would stop trying to kill him now that she'd realized he was her only hope for survival. Raj pointed toward the reins and took the binoculars.

"We're going west," he said.

"What about me?"

Raj sighed. She must know she was in trouble. What could he say?

"I can't take you back to the edge of the Tigahili. They know my face in the city. And even if we find another caravan, it's unlikely they'll take a complete stranger, especially if I bring you to them. Around these parts, gifts aren't trusted."

The girl sobbed silently, shoulders shaking, head bent. Raj saw that she kept the reins under control and let her be.

"You are a good driver," he said, still scanning the swamp with the binoculars.

The cadaver of the swampiphant wasn't difficult to spot. Soon they were close enough to hear the wailing, and a few minutes later, he saw canoes coming out to greet him. Raj signaled.

"Raj, Chief is dead!" the first man shouted as soon as he set foot on the swampiphant's back.

Raj nodded. Before anyone could pre-empt his ascendancy, he let out a belly roar, a cry he knew would be heard in the village.

"I am Chief! I am Chief! I am Chief!" he hollered.

The man extended his hands toward Raj, palms up.

"Whoa, Raj, you know I would never challenge you. We're friends, right?" Warily, he tiptoed closer and placed a hand on Raj's shoulder. "I'm friends with the Chief!" he shouted and was greeted with laughter and cheers from below.

"Say, who's that girl? Mermeat?" he asked.

Raj made a split-second decision. He'd seen the envy in his "friend's" eyes and he'd never forget the bargain the merpeople had thrust on him. To be Chief meant to be under constant attack, from above and from below. His mother was right: an heirless Chief was an accident waiting to happen.

"My wife-to-be," he said. Any girl was better than no girl, and this one was better than anyone his mother could come up with. "She's a fine driver and skilled with a crossbow. She's not tagged in the city and we can even use her as bait until word gets around."

His "friend" nodded.

"New blood. Good idea, Chief." The empty flattery amused Raj.

He ordered the men to drive them back to the village and took the girl aside.

"What was all of that about?" she asked.

"I just saved your life. I hope that the next time you shoot that crossbow it'll be to save mine. Can you throw a knife?"

"No."

"I'll teach you, but don't even think of killing me. Women can't be Chief and the price for murder is death."

The girl wiped the tears from her eyes and struggled to steady her breathing. For a second, Raj felt a pang of guilt.

"I'll be a good husband," he promised.

"But you stink," she moaned.

"In a couple of weeks, you too will stink and then you'll stop noticing."

The girl laughed. "Oh, Gods. They warned me something like this would happen if I kept going with the caravans!"

Raj was confounded. The caravans paid well. A few men had gotten rich driving caravans, and the fact that many more had died didn't deter the hungry underbelly of the city from trying. He'd even seen (and killed) a few women whom he guessed to be ex-prostitutes with a death wish. But this girl didn't sound like a street child or a whore.

"Why did you do it?" Raj asked.

"The swampiphants. I used to love riding them in my father's estate in Kirgahesh.

When my father tried to marry me off to one of his friends, I ran off and had nowhere to go. The caravan leaders always need good drivers. Nobody asked questions."

Raj wrapped a muddy arm around his fiancée's shoulders, realizing that she was foolish but not unattractive.

"I like swampiphants myself. Did you know their paws are webbed, like a duck's? And in mating season, you can hear them bellow for miles. It's the best time to take a caravan—with the swampiphants making so much noise, nobody notices you climbing. Their legs sink at least two or three man-heights around these parts, maybe even four closer to Kismut where the mud is softer and . . ."

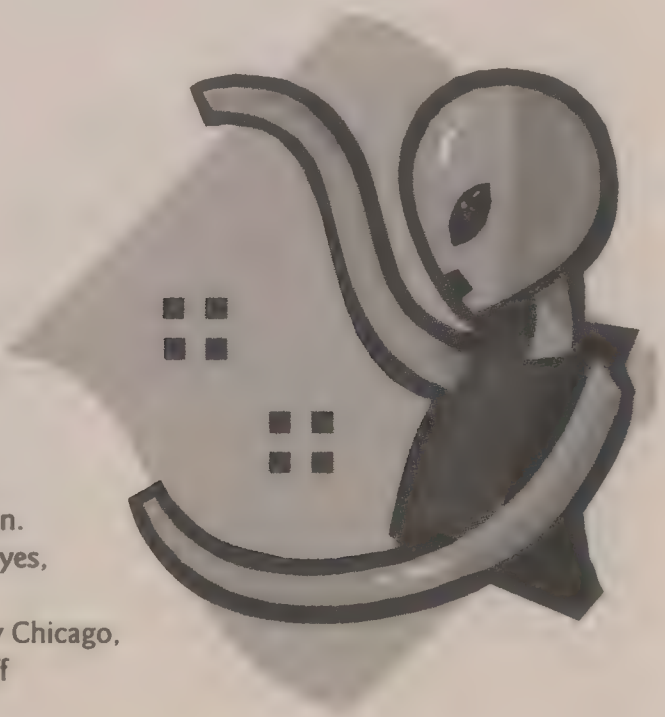
"Yes!" she interrupted. "They suckle their young, and they say the birthing is something to behold, but I've never seen one. I've been told they dig into the mud before giving birth . . ."

"No, but they go deeper into the Swamp. In spring, I'll take you to the Salt. There are thirty to fifty birthings there each year. With the canoe, I can get you in close enough that you can see how the baby turns and twists as it comes out of its mother."

They chatted away as night closed in. The tulips bloomed, the air hummed and the men sang. Raj turned around to watch the second sun set. When he saw the flash of green, Raj roared with glee. It was his favorite time of the day, and the Swamp was his.

In the silence that followed Raj remembered the mermaid's threat and he bit back his anger to stop it from showing. The feeling passed and he smiled to himself. The Mer didn't know who they were up against. In the morning, he'd figure out a way to deal with them. Nobody threatened Raj. ○

CABARET



No be-bop, no swing,
just the blues, slow blues.
That's all they want.
That's all we play.

What do aliens feel
when they close their eyes,
sway slowly to human music?

Before their dinner,
I pop a couple black market judies,
washed down with imitation bourbon.
When they kick in, I close my own eyes,
visualize a different time,
playing Le Cercle Rouge back in New Chicago,
my horn floating over Tony's bass riff
and Amy's inverted chords.

After the show,
the guards lock us up in our small rooms.
I dream of aliens,
bug-eyed with sharp yellow teeth.
No judies at night.
I have to save those for the stage (And no,
I won't share the unspeakable things
I do to get them.)

The next night, they bring us back out
through the kitchen, always
through the kitchen,
past that night's dinner:
women, children first.
Their dumb eyes, tear-stained,
plead silently.

And every night,
the manager comes up to the stage,
nods back toward the kitchen,
sneers and says,
"You boys better play well tonight."

—J.E. Stanley



WHATNESS

Benjamin Crowell

Benjamin Crowell is a community college physics professor in Southern California who has sold stories to Jim Baen's Universe and Strange Horizons. In his first story for us, he investigates the consequences of a very big mistake.

It was a sad job, and more than a little embarrassing. Two orphaned awarenesses, both of consciousness class 13.5b or thereabout.

"Hello? Help!"

It emitted these information patterns—or would have, if there had still been a universe around it to emit them into. The referents for the symbols no longer existed, but I could still infer their meanings from the web of relationships preserved in its mind. The companion-creature was a slightly different type, and used an incompatible system for communicating.

"Is there anybody there?" the first creature continued. "Please, I can't see anything."

I am here.

"Oh Jesus, are you a doctor?"

Jesus . . . doctor . . . *No, neither of those.*

It produced something that seemed to be an carrier wave—nearly unmodulated except for gradual rises and falls in pitch, and information-free as far as I could tell. Finally it spoke in words again: "Tell me straight out. Am I dead?"

Ah, no, it's the opposite. Your consciousness continues to exist, and also your companion's. It's your universe that has been . . .

"Go ahead, I can take it. It's armageddon, the end of time?"

No, not exactly. Your timeline hasn't been truncated. Actually, I regret to inform you that your entire spacetime has been accidentally . . . deleted. Not just its future, but also its past. It's as if it had never existed. I searched its mind for the right words. *Mistakes were made.*

More carrier waves, and then: "So . . . it's just the two of us—two ghosts lost in space?"

Not lost in space—your space was lost. It seemed to be having trouble understanding. They weren't 13.5b, then—probably no more than 13.5c, or even d.

"But . . . it's just us, Jim and Diane, and nobody else was saved?"

I saw that Jim was its label for itself—or his label for himself, using the pronouns he considered appropriate. But: *Diane was your wife? No, your companion is the one you call Boo.*

"The dog?"

Yes. You and Boo were together. Once the deletion had begun, we made a rescue attempt, but you two were the only consciousnesses within range. There was a ten light-nanosecond radius that could be probed before the collapse was irreversible.

I expected more carrier waves, but Jim surprised me by remaining silent for a long time. Had its—his psyche been damaged by the shock? A 13.5d would be on the razor's edge of rationality even under the best conditions. I reached into his mind and saw that my fear had been groundless. Jim was happy to have Boo with him rather than Diane.

Jim?

"Yeah?"

I'm here to try to mitigate the mistake. We can mock up a new universe for you, a simulation that operates according to the same rules.

"Like life after death?"

No, I already explained that you're not dead. Let's start with the logical rules that operated in your universe. Once we establish those, the physics should be straightforward.

"Science was never my best subject."

Let X be a logical proposition, and consider the proposition Y defined by X or not X. Is Y necessarily true?

"Uh, how's that again?"

Definitely a 13.5d. I made it more concrete for him: *Suppose X is the statement that fairies exist, but these fairies are undetectable. Then Y is the statement that either fairies exist, or they don't. Is Y true by your universe's logical rules?*

"Well, I don't know. How would I know if they exist, if I can't even see them?"

Of course. That's proposition X. I'm asking you about proposition Y. In other words, does your universe's logic have propositions that are neither true nor false?

We went on like this for a while, without much more progress. I switched to physics.

Let's talk about motion, Jim. In your universe, do things naturally keep moving if they're already moving, or do they naturally slow down?

"They slow down." At least he seemed certain of that. I was glad; it always nauseates me to land on a world that's spinning or orbiting.

I kept questioning him, but have you ever tried to get a class-13.5d intelligence to frame a consistent world-view? He was constantly contradicting himself, and then claiming not to see the contradictions. He couldn't even tell me whether the angles of a triangle added up to a fixed amount.

Jim, maybe we don't need to reconstruct your universe accurately. Let's just make a simulation that you and Boo will be happy in. Tell me what you really want.

"You mean, like heaven?"

Tell me about heaven.

"Well, I guess I'd live in the clouds, and have wings and a harp, and sing hymns all the time."

Perfect. These clouds are metaphorical, aren't they? So we don't have to get the physics right. The structure of the space doesn't matter, and we just let time run to infinity.

"Infinite time? You mean forever?"

Yes. That's what you want, isn't it?

"No . . . no, I don't think so." He paused, and when I poked around in his squalid little mind, I saw that indeed, it would not make him happy as t approached infinity.

Reproductive activities? With a variety of females?

"What, babies? Changing diapers? Hell, no! I was just thinking . . ."

I saw what you were thinking. Tell me truthfully, Jim. Would you enjoy that for an infinite amount of time?

Jim jabbered on, but I turned my attention to Boo. I had neglected the dog because it didn't have the same language system, but when I inspected its mind more closely, it turned out to be much tidier and better organized than the man's. I realized now that when I had been discussing time with Jim, or triangles, or logic, those symbols had been fuzzy to him. He had never really understood the timeness of time, or the triangleness of triangles. Boo, on the other hand, clearly understood the whatness of what—at least for some kinds of whats.

Before the deletion, Boo and Jim had been on their way to the beach, where Boo was to chase a frisbee. Boo understood the frisbeeness of the frisbee. I reached into Boo's mind, and saw with great clarity what Boo would enjoy doing with Jim as t approached infinity. I tuned out Jim's tiresome prattle, and settled down to work with Boo. ❍

GETTING REAL

Harry Turtledove

Harry Turtledove's most recent novels include an alternate history, *The United States of Atlantis* (Roc), and a fantasy, *The Breath of God* (Tor). A straight historical, *Give Me Back My Legions!*, will be coming out from St. Martin's in the very near future. In other news, he tells us, "It looks like one of my daughters will be getting married later this year." In "Getting Real," we are shown a vision of a deeply disturbing future.

Pablo Ramirez ambled along the streets of East Los Angeles. He was looking for work, looking for love, looking for drugs, looking for whatever the hell he could find. He knew too well he didn't have much now.

For that matter, neither did East L.A.—or any other part of the huge, sprawling city. Somebody online had called Los Angeles a town with a fine future behind it. Like so many jokes with too much truth in them, that one had spread virally. It must have, if a loser like Pablo had heard it.

He almost tripped on cracked concrete. Nobody'd fixed these sidewalks for a long, long time. A line of shopfronts were boarded up. The ones that weren't had signs in Spanish, English, Chinese, Hindi, Korean. . . .

You could still find anybody from anywhere in Los Angeles. Anybody who was poor and didn't have the sense to go someplace else, anyhow. No, Los Angeles wasn't much different from anywhere else in the United States these days.

Swarms of bicycles and pedicabs executed intricate dances on the streets. The asphalt between the sidewalks was in crappy shape, too. A few hydrogen- and electric-powered cars tried to pick their way through the people-powered traffic. The drivers leaned on their horns. Not that it did them much good—bicyclists and pedicab operators grabbed horn tones off the Net the way everybody else grabbed ring tones. And little tiny speakers could make a hell of a lot of noise.

Speaking of noise . . . Pablo stared in mixed awe and horror. Damned if that wasn't a genuine, no-shit, chrome-dripping Harley hog thundering up the road toward him. Hydrocarbon fumes belched from the monster's tailpipe. School and the Net and TV and vidgames and priests and even most avatars declared adding more greenhouse gases to the atmosphere was a crime or a sin or both at once. But oh my God! Wasn't that Harley awesome? Everybody on the sidewalks—whites, goldens, several shades of browns, blacks—stopped in her or his tracks to gape at the motorcycle. The black dude on it grinned from under his gleaming Fritz hat. Just to add to the general effect, he'd dyed his beard in red, white, and blue stripes. He'd also chromed the metalwork on the folding-stock AK slung on his back.

Two cops walked toward and then past Pablo. Their helmets gave much more serious protection than the cycle jockey's brain bucket. They wore full body armor under their urban-camo tunics, too. And the minichain guns they carried could chew up that ancient AK and spit it out.

Cops were the enemy till proved otherwise. They knew it, too—why else travel in threes? Two of them were white. The power structure still worked the way it always had.

All the same, what the taller white guy said to his partners was exactly—exactly!—what Pablo was thinking: "Man, that is one fuckin' amazing ride!"

"Bet your ass," agreed the cop who wasn't white. He was an Indian—brown variety, not red.

A woman screeched. A guy took off with her purse. He ran like an Olympic sprinter marinated in steroids. The woman pounded after him in hot but hopeless pursuit.

"Hold it right there, dipshit!" the Indian cop yelled, raising his piece.

If he opened up with that mother, he could depopulate a block's worth of jam-packed sidewalk—with no guarantee he'd take out the purse snatcher. Nobody in his right mind would start shooting under conditions like that. Of course, who in his right mind wanted to be a cop?

Pablo wasn't the only one making that street-smart calculation. Oh, no, baby—not even close! People of all different colors screamed and ducked and scattered and got the hell out of there. Pablo did his best to disappear like an avatar. He ducked around corners and ended up in a little maze of side streets he was liable to need GPS to escape from.

He looked around. Somebody sitting under a dying tree looked back—or, more likely, just looked through him—with dead eyes. A fat Hispanic woman and an even fatter red Indian gal passed a bottle of wine back and forth and giggled. It wasn't even 1100 yet, but they'd already got the morning off to a hell of a start. A pack of brown Indian kids played field hockey in the street . . . or maybe they just got off on whaling one another with sticks.

And then an avatar appeared out of nowhere in front of Pablo, as avatars had a way of doing. This one was an improbably beautiful, impossibly stacked Hispanic girl—woman. Definitely woman. Her perfume promised everything, or whatever was bigger than everything.

Her smile . . . How could you not almost come in your jeans if a woman like that smiled at you that way? And her voice . . . A voice like that should've been illegal. It sure as hell was immoral.

"English?" she purred seductively. "*¿O español?*"

"Uh, either way." Pablo's voice was hoarse. The answer came out in English.

"Okay, big boy." The avatar used English, too. She definitely left you dissatisfied with the local talent. Hell, she made you think the local talent *wasn't* talent. "Wanna get . . . Real?"

"Oh, man! Do I ever!" Pablo exclaimed.

She came up to him. She took his hand. The way she touched him . . . Jesus! He'd had lays he wouldn't remember like this. He hoped she'd kiss him, too. Instead, she winked. And then she winked out, like a suddenly snuffed candle flame.

Pablo looked down at his astonished palm. The little green square of cardboardy stuff there was real. Better yet—it was Real.

He'd been waiting for a chance like this. Waiting? He'd been *praying* for a chance like this. In L.A., he was nothing. He was nobody, and he had zero chance of turning into somebody. Almost zero chance. He could have won the lottery. Or he could have got Real.

And now he had. His smile spread almost as wide as the avatar's, even if he was nowhere near so pretty. He knew what to do. Who didn't? He touched the cardboardy square to the side of his head, just above and in front of his right ear. Smiling still, he slowly crumpled to the sidewalk.

Lieutenant Shapur Razmara's cell rang. He grabbed it off the desk. "Razmara.

LAPD," he said, and listened to an excited civilian, transferred to him from the front desk. "Oh, Jesus Christ!" he exclaimed when the civilian paused. He was a Shiite Muslim, but not what anybody would call devout. "What's your address at that location, ma'am?"

"It's 2527 Ganahl, Officer," the woman answer. "There was one of those . . . those things, and then it went away again, and then he fell over."

"Avatars," Razmara said absently. He was a stocky, swarthy man with a thick pelt of black hair and an equally luxuriant black mustache, both just starting to show gray.

"Things," the woman . . . agreed? "You people better hurry up, before something else happens to the poor, stupid yock."

"We're on our way, ma'am," Razmara assured her, and rang off. He checked the big flatscreen monitor on his desk to find out where the devil 2527 Ganahl was exactly. Then he stuck a DNA kit in the inside pocket of his microfiber blazer. He caught the eye of the sergeant whose desk sat next to his. "Ready to roll, Stas? Sounds like another case of Real."

"Wait one." Anastasios Kyriades finished dictating a paragraph. Then he stood up. His mustache was even bushier than the lieutenant's, but he had only a little hair fringing a shiny bald pate.

Razmara muttered to himself. Cell phones. Computers. DNA kits. That stuff was all very twenty-first-century. Which, in the year 2117 of the Common Era, did them how much good? Some, yeah. But not enough. Nowhere near enough.

They hurried out to the black-and-white. "How much of a charge does it have?" Kyriades asked, heading for the driver's-side door.

"Enough to get us there," Razmara said. "Probably enough to get us back."

"Great."

Before either one of them could slide into the cop car, an avatar popped up in front of them. Shapur Razmara hadn't seen this one. He would have remembered her. If he'd ever had a wet dream about an Asian woman . . . He shook his head. His wet dreams were nowhere near this hot.

She looked from him to Sergeant Kyriades and back again. Then she shook her head in what might have been scorn or pity or both at once. "You poor sorry assholes," she said in a voice like sin dipped in honey. A split second later, she was gone.

"Fuck," Kyriades said wearily. "How *do* they do that shit, anyway?"

"If I knew . . ." Razmara shook his head and spread his hands. When you banged into avatars and Real and all that other stuff, banged into 'em headlong and full throttle, cell phones and computers and DNA kits started looking like mighty small potatoes.

"Well, we gotta try," Stas said as he got in.

"Uh-huh." Razmara buckled his seat belt. Away they went.

The dragon studied Pablo with topaz eyes full of ancient evil. "You shall not have my hoard," it hissed, each word sounding individually scorched.

"That's what you think, Charlie." Pablo took a step forward. He could feel the way the soft leather of his boots gripped his feet and his calves. He could feel the slight scratchiness of his heavy wool breeches against his legs, and the soft smoothness of his sapphire silk tunic.

And he could feel the weight of the sword on his left hip. His hand dropped to the hilt. The dragonhide in which it was wrapped was rough against his fingers. His neck muscles tensed against the weight of his helmet.

"Flee now, while you still have the chance," the dragon warned. It smelled of brimstone and serpent and terror.

Pablo's heart thuttered inside his chest; he could distinctly feel each beat. He looked around—quickly, so the dragon didn't strike while he was distracted. No, no

one else had come up the trail through the dark woods with him. A breeze blew fallen elm and oak leaves across the path.

He drew the sword. All the light in the neighborhood seemed to focus on the blade. "You're the one who'd better run," he growled. Brandishing that shining weapon was the most natural thing in the world. "I've got your number, man, and you know it."

"Even fate yields to fire," the dragon said. It opened its mouth wide. Its breath smelled like five sacks of groceries forgotten for two weeks in a locked car in the middle of August. And then the flame flowed forth. Whoever'd invented napalm back in the old days must have been thinking of dragons.

But nothing stopped napalm. When the sword with the dragonhide hilt smote the dragonfire, it magically transformed the flames to harmless mist. The dragon's hoarse, guttural shriek of despair almost deafened Pablo.

He thrust home. He could feel the point piercing the hard scales of the dragon's belly. He could feel it probing for the monster's heart. And, as he'd felt his own heart pound, he felt the dragon's stop. The creature tried to curse him, but died with the words still unspoken. That was good, because curses here were as Real as everything else.

Dragon blood steaming and smoking on the sword, Pablo pressed past the bend in the path to find out how big a hoard the great worm had had. Gold: coins and chains and rings and armlets. Silver: more coins, and bowls and spoons and a mighty drinking horn half as tall as a man. Jewels: some set into gold and silver, others simply sparkling alone, rubies and emeralds and sapphires and diamonds. A king's ransom? It was the ransom of a continent full of kings. And it was Pablo's, all Pablo's.

He'd pretty much expected that kind of stuff. What he hadn't expected was that the dragon's hoard also included the most gorgeous redhead he'd ever seen. All she wore was her hair, which fell nearly to her waist.

"My hero!" she cried in a voice like bells, and cast herself into his arms.

From then on, matters proceeded rapidly. They lay down together. He thrust home. He could feel everything that happened after that, too. Oh, could he ever!

Shapur Razmara stared down in tired disgust at the guy lying on the sidewalk with a little square of green cardboard plastered to the side of his head and a shit-eating grin plastered all over his face. "Another one," he said, in exactly the tone of voice he would have used to count cowflops at a fertilizer factory.

"Fuckin' dingleberry," Sergeant Kyriades agreed. "Let's get Real." He sounded about ready to york on his shoes.

"More and more of these stupid . . ." Razmara's voice trailed off. Even though he was a cop with twenty years on the job, he couldn't think of anything vile enough to call them. He wanted to spit into this unconscious punk's face—not that that would have accomplished anything except to win him a disciplinary hearing, and not that the punk would even have noticed.

"We go through the motions?" Kyriades asked resignedly.

"Got a better idea, Stas?" Razmara said.

"They don't pay me enough to have ideas," his partner answered.

"Oh, yeah, like I'm so goddamn rich." Razmara snorted. "Twenty million a month and all the acid-blockers I can pop. Hot damn!" Twenty million dollars a month and you could pick two out of three from child support, rent, and food. You couldn't have 'em all—he'd found that out again and again, the hard way.

"More'n I bring in," Kyriades said. Which was true, but he'd managed to stay married. Not for the first time, Lieutenant Razmara wondered how. Sure as hell wasn't his looks.

That was a worry for another day. "Gather up the goods," Razmara said.

"Right." The sergeant nodded. Persians and Greeks—they'd only been fighting for

2,500 years. But Razmara and Kyriades got on fine. And, since they were both white men whose first language was English, they counted for Anglos in Los Angeles. A Muslim Anglo? An Orthodox one? Why not? There were plenty of Jewish "Anglos" in L.A., but mostly on the West Side.

Kyriades pulled a plastic evidence bag and a tweezer out of his jacket pocket. He used the tweezer to capture the green square—you didn't want to touch it bare-handed. The LAPD had found out about that—again, the hard way. Along with the rest of the United States, the LAPD was finding out about all kinds of things the hard way these days.

"So we'll take it back to the lab, right?" Kyriades said, carefully stashing the little square in the evidence bag.

"Sure." Razmara nodded. "What else? Gotta follow procedures." His great-grandad would have talked the same way about following the Koran. Stas' great-grandfather, no doubt, would have yattered about the Bible the same way. To them in the old days, and to the lieutenant now, Holy Writ was Holy Writ. If you didn't follow procedures (or the Koran, or the Bible—check one), Bad Things Would Happen.

Well, Bad Things were already happening. Getting Real, for instance.

"So we'll take the fucking thing back to the lab," Kyriades repeated. "And the gals in the white coats will do whatever the hell they do, right? And then they'll tell us the same thing those sorry suckers tell us every goddamn time." His baritone rasp—he sounded like a three-pack-a-day guy, though he wasn't—went falsetto: "'We can't analyze what's in it. We've got no clue how it fucks up the assholes who use it.' Shit." The last word was in his usual tones again.

"Yeah, yeah." Shapur Razmara had heard it all before. Hell, he'd said it all before. It was all true. Saying it didn't do a thousand dollars' worth of good. The LAPD was screwed. The whole country was screwed, and had been for years. Just the same . . . "You have a better idea, Sherlock?"

"I already told you, they don't pay me enough for that."

"You tell me all kinds of crap," Razmara said. "You expect me to keep it sorted out, too?"

"Ahh, your mama," Kyriades retorted. They grinned at each other. You had to get on with your partner pretty well to be able to give him that kind of grief. Kyriades stirred the Realie with his toe. "We oughta call the meat wagon for this guy."

"What we *oughta* do is let him lay there, let his little pals rifle his pockets and maybe smash in his dumb fuckin' head." But duty won. Razmara went over to the car and called for an ambulance. "There. Happy now?"

"If I am, how come my face don't know it?"

Kyriades might have gone on singing that song for some time. He might have, but he didn't, because a different avatar appeared in front of him and Razmara. Razmara's service revolver was in his hand before he quite knew how it got there. The avatar—a bare-chested guy, definitely hunky—threw back his head and laughed. Then he threw his arms wide in invitation. "Go ahead, man. Shoot me. Stun me. Whatever gets you off."

"Bite me," Razmara said. Talking back to avatars went against doctrine, but sometimes they pissed you off so much you couldn't help yourself. If he did shoot this one, the bullet would go on through as if the thing were so much air. If he yanked out his stun gun instead, he would be stunning nothing.

But an avatar could touch him. An avatar could hand out things if he wanted to . . . things like little cardboard squares, for instance.

How? The cop didn't know. The LAPD crime lab sure as hell didn't. Nobody in the USA did.

"Wanna . . . get Real?" the avatar asked, holding out a little blue square and a little yellow one.

"No," Razmara said stonily.

"Fuck off and die," Kyriades explained.

The avatar only laughed some more. "Shoveling shit against the tide," he said, and winked out of existence. Shapur wished he would have thought the thing was wrong.

Hu Zhiaoxing dressed with meticulous care for his conference with the American diplomats. As befitted a country living in the past, the United States preferred—indeed, insisted on—formalwear of long-outmoded style. And so Third Minister Hu had had to learn such archaic skills as tying shoelaces and knotting a cravat. That wasn't quite a hangman's knot, even if it felt like one with the pale blue shirt's collar button buttoned. He wondered why people in bygone days had insisted on such uncomfortable clothes.

"Ready, Minister?" his aide asked. Wang Zemin didn't have to worry about putting on a silly outfit before he went and explained the facts of life to the Americans. *He* was wearing a pullover with a sensibly loose neckline, elasticated pants, and memory-foam slip-on shoes.

"I suppose so," Hu said resignedly. The jacket with lapels he shrugged on wasn't particularly bad to wear. It just looked stupid. Well, no help for it. He grabbed his briefcase—one more bit of flummery. "Yes, let's go."

From the harbor at Avalon, Minister Hu could see the American mainland on the eastern horizon. China had taken Catalina and the other Channel Islands a generation earlier, after the USA—again!—found itself unable to pay its bills. Avalon had been a pretty little town before the transfer of sovereignty: Hu had seen old pictures. In his admittedly biased opinion, it was prettier now.

As they got into the boat, Wang Zemin said, "A pity you can't do this by avatar, and spare the annoyance of real travel."

"If I'm not there in the flesh, the Americans will think we're insulting them." Minister Hu rephrased that for greater precision: "Looking down our noses at them."

"Well, so what? We *do* look down our noses at them," Wang said. "If they want to think so, fine. As for insulting them . . . The trouble with them is, they still think these are the old days, when they knew everything worth knowing and could throw their weight around as much as they pleased. It's not like that any more."

"No. It's not," Hu Zhiaoxing agreed. "But they still have their pride."

"They have more of it than they know what to do with," his aide said. "Why else would you have to go see them in person? Why else would you have to speak English when you do? The whole world uses Mandarin these days. The whole world—except for them. They need to get Real."

He touched a button. The boat sprang away from the pier. It would cross the forty-odd kilometers—twenty-six miles, an ancient song called the distance, and the Americans still clung to their cumbersome old measurements—in little more than half an hour.

Seabirds squawked in the sky, though they soon fell behind the boat. Unless you were a birder, which Hu wasn't, the gulls and cormorants and pelicans on this side of the Pacific looked pretty much like the ones far to the west.

An honor guard awaited the minister and his aide when they got to the harbor at San Pedro. The men looked tough and capable. Their uniforms and weapons . . . As charitably as he could, Hu thought, *China has better.*

A white man in a suit much like his came forward and held out his hand. "How do you do, sir?" he said in English. "I'm Brett Hill, the protocol chief."

"Pleased to meet you," Minister Hu said. He shook hands—one more old-fashioned ritual you had to endure with Americans. "But I understood I was to meet with the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of the DEA?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" Hill had a broad, eager, friendly smile of the sort the minister instinctively distrusted. "They're waiting for you not far from here. We have a car to take you to the hotel."

He gestured. The large, muscular car was an American model. Hu Zhiaoxing sighed to himself. If the officials weren't far away, the machine would probably get him there without breaking down. Wang Zemin's expression was eloquent. He didn't say anything. Neither did Hu. He just nodded. *The things I do for my country*, he thought.

Smiling still, the protocol chief led them to the Saturn. The honor guard presented arms when the Chinese walked past. One man's hand twisted for a moment as he gripped the stock of his minichain. Only a Realie would have used that gesture. Hu's face betrayed nothing. Neither did Wang's. The aide didn't mind showing what he thought of the American government. Getting an ordinary soldier in trouble was a different story.

The car idled roughly. Its shocks left something to be desired. Brett Hill plainly thought it was state of the art. Minister Hu didn't waste time educating him. Life was too short. Hill also plainly took potholes for granted. A raised eyebrow from Hu passed a message to his aide. *He's only an American. He doesn't know any better.* Wang gave back an almost imperceptible nod of his own.

They'd cleaned up the Marriott—it was indeed near the harbor—so it almost came up to Chinese standards. That only made the neighborhood around the place seem more blighted by comparison.

In the conference room where the American dignitaries waited, Hu declined ice water. He accepted tea. Drug residues in a small cup wouldn't be *too* bad, and boiling ought to kill the germs. Wang Zemin drank nothing at all.

Secretary of State Jackson was short and plump and black. Secretary of Defense Berkowitz was short and thin and white. Secretary of the DEA Kojima was short and potbellied (but not really plump) and, by his looks, no more than a quarter Asian. Both Hu and Wang were five or six centimeters taller than any of them—and taller than Brett Hill, too, for that matter. *Better nutrition when we were growing up*, Hu thought.

But that had nothing to do with the price of rice. "As you requested, gentlemen, I am here," he said. "What can I do for you today?"

"You've got to stop selling your poison in our towns!" Kojima burst out.

"It isn't poison," Hu said. "Besides, very often we don't sell it. We give it away. How can anyone possibly object to that?"

"Pushers have been saying 'The first one's free' as long as there've been drugs." Contempt dripped from the DEA chief's voice. "'Wanna . . . get Real?'" He contrived to make the question sound obscene.

Patiently, Hu Zhiaoxing said, "You seem to be laboring under a mistaken impression. Getting Real has nothing to do with drugs. It's a matter of metastimulation of specific brain regions."

"Sounds like bullshit to me," the Secretary of Defense whispered to the Secretary of State. Hu knew he wasn't supposed to hear that, but he did. China had technical leads in more areas than the Americans realized, and those leads were wider than the Americans thought.

"How do you produce this, uh, metastimulation?" Jackson asked.

"We have ways," Hu answered. "I could not tell you myself. I am not an artisan shaping that particular form of knowledge."

"It's got to stop," Kojima said. "Do you have any idea how much productivity we're losing because people would rather get Real than work or do anything else?"

"Don't you think that should be a warning to you, Mr. Secretary?" Hu said.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Kojima didn't impress the Chinese as being either very polite or very bright.

"If your citizens had lives that were more worth living, getting Real would not seem so enjoyable to them," Hu Zhiaoxing replied.

All three American Cabinet officials glared at him. "It's your fault that we don't," Secretary of State Jackson said bitterly.

"*My* fault?" Minister Hu pointed at his own chest, then shook his head. "I am sorry, sir, but I must reject the imputation."

"Not your fault personally. I didn't mean that," Jackson said. "Your country's fault."

"What did China do?" Hu answered his own question before any of the Americans could: "China collected the debts the United States owed her. No one forced the United States to contract those debts—and many others. You did it of your own free will."

"And then you broke us. And you left us broke," Jackson said.

Hu couldn't help shrugging. "I would say you did it to yourselves. I would also say you resent us for going on to discover new fields of knowledge after you could no longer stay in that game yourselves."

"Damn right we do," Berkowitz muttered. Again, Hu wasn't supposed to hear. Again, he did. This time, though, the Secretary of Defense went on to speak directly to the Chinese minister: "We're sick and tired of you pushing us around, and we aren't going to take it any more. You say you won't stop ramming getting Real down our throat?"

"Our position is that we are merely supplying a demand," Hu replied. "Only your unfortunate inability to offer your consumers anything nearly so interesting and exciting causes your resentment of it. Jealousy, I must say, is not an appropriate motive for foreign policy."

Berkowitz breathed hard through his nose. And a long, ugly nose it was, too, at least to someone with Hu's standards. "This is not a matter of jealousy. This is a matter of national security. Security, nothing—this is a matter of national survival. If you think you can make people in this country not give a damn about anything except getting Real—"

You're right, Hu Zhiaoxing thought irreverently.

But that wasn't where the American Secretary of Defense was going. "If that's what you think, you've got another think coming."

An old song had lyrics something like that, a song from the days when the United States really was the world power it still imagined itself to be. "What precisely are you driving at, sir?" Hu asked.

The Secretary of State responded before the Secretary of Defense could: "If you don't quit pushing Real in the USA, that can only mean war between your country and mine."

All three Americans looked stern and determined, as if they were playing parts in a thriller from a director who didn't know what the devil he was doing. Wang Zemin . . . giggled. The Americans gaped at him. Minister Hu sent him a reproachful glance—that wasn't how you were supposed to play the game. Which didn't mean the Third Minister didn't feel like giggling himself.

"I must tell you, Mr. Jackson, that that would be . . . inadvisable," he said.

"You think you can do whatever you please here, and it doesn't come with a price," Jackson said. "But that's not the way things work. We *can* protect our borders."

"You can try . . . sir," Minister Hu said coolly.

"We can—and we will," Secretary of State Jackson said.

"You have been warned," Secretary of Defense Berkowitz added.

"If you think you can go on corrupting us and humiliating us, we just have to show you how totally wrong you are," Secretary of the DEA Kojima declared. "And I mean *totally*."

After that, nobody on either side seemed to see much point to saying anything else.

The Chinese diplomat and his aide went back to the Saturn. It carried them to the harbor without falling apart. They boarded their little boat. Wang Zemin steered it back to Avalon. He laughed most of the way there.

Pablo opened his eyes. He closed them again as fast as he could. But when he opened them a second time, nothing had changed. This wasn't Real. This, goddammit to hell, was real. And it was that particularly depressing part of reality called jail.

He looked around the holding tank. A couple of Hispanic guys like him. Three or four brown Indian guys. A couple of black guys. A couple of skinny but dangerous-looking Asian guys—if they didn't have shanks stashed somewhere, he would have been amazed. And a couple of white guys: one who seemed scared shitless, the other looking as if he'd been carved from granite—a fuck of a lot of granite. Regardless of how buff he was, he wouldn't last long if he acted stupid. If enough guys jumped on you, you could really be made of granite and you'd break anyway.

One of the Indians lit a cigarette. Most of the time, Pablo thought tobacco smoke was gross. Piled on top of all the other stinks here, it didn't seem so bad.

The massive white guy scowled at Pablo from two of the coldest, nastiest gray eyes ever. The LEDs in the ceiling lights gleamed off the dude's shaved head. "So—you're awake, huh?" he rumbled in a voice like boulders crashing together.

If this was real, Pablo wanted Real. Oh, man, he *really* wanted Real. He wished that sweet-talking avatar would show up so he could forget all about this. Hey, it could happen, even in jail. The cops wished they could stop avatars. Wishing didn't do them any good, either.

And Pablo still had to answer the mountain of toned meat. "No, man," he said, "but I figure I'll wake up pretty soon, you know?"

"Huh?" The white guy blinked. Pablo hadn't been a hundred percent sure he could—snakes never did. Then he decided it was funny. His laugh sounded like kettledrums. "Comedian, are you?"

Right. And then you wake up, Pablo thought. But that was the trouble. Pablo *had* woken up. What a bringdown. He reminded himself he needed to answer again. "Sure, man. Me and the dragon."

He threw it out at random. Besides, the dragon was dead, and this dude hadn't got Real with him anyway. With that carcass, the white guy looked more likely to be into something like HGH 3.0 than avatars and everything that went with them. The more fool him. That redhead . . . Remembering her made you want to forget all the genuine local girls.

You couldn't always tell by looks. The hard-muscled white guy proved that. When the fingers on his right hand twisted a particular way, Pablo damn near fell over. "*Dude!*" he said. "You got some? You got some *here*? How'd you do that?"

"Talent, man," the other guy answered smugly. He turned out to have it stashed in the waistband of his jeans. It wasn't the kind of shit mechanical bloodhounds could find, the way they sniffed out crank or Superoxy or coke nuevo. Pablo happily pressed a little cardboardy square to his temple. Even more happily, he forgot real and got Real.

The only way the jailer could have been more bored would have been to die day before yesterday. He stopped in front of the holding tank. "Ramirez, Pablo!" he sang out. "Come forward for your hearing."

Nobody came forward. One of the men in the cell pointed to a guy who was lying there not looking at anything under this sun. "I think that is him," the prisoner said in a singsong Indian accent.

Ramirez wasn't the only one who'd ridden the express away from the material

world, either. The bastard who looked like an murderball frontman was down for the count, too.

"Well, fuck me." The jailer wasn't bored any more—he was pissed off instead. "How'd they get the shit? Where'd it come from?"

Nobody said a word. The conscious assholes in the holding tank all radiated ignorance and innocence. As far as they were concerned, the mothers who'd got Real must've picked up their shit a mile beyond the moon. The jailer swore in weary resignation. Maybe the surveillance video would show something.

"You sorry suckers," the jailer told the conscious prisoners. "It could be you next time."

He knew that was a mistake as soon as he said it. Too late, of course. You always realized shit like that too late. None of the losers in the cell let out a peep, even now. But every goddamn one of them looked like he wanted it to be him next time.

Pounding the crap out of Catalina and the other Channel Islands should have been a piece of cake. After all, the islands were within artillery range of the American mainland. By rights, even cruise missiles should have been overkill. Manned fighters should have been ridiculously over the top.

"Coulda, woulda, shoulda," Major Dmitri Gomez muttered as he climbed into the cockpit of his F-27 at Edwards Air Force base, up in the high-desert country north of L.A. Things had a way of going wrong when the United States tangled with China. If that weren't true, the damned Chinese wouldn't hold the Channel Islands in the first place. Their casinos in Avalon wouldn't be draining trillions of dollars out of an American economy that couldn't begin to afford it. Vampires, that's what they were, sucking what little was left of the USA's blood right on out of it.

As for getting Real . . . Major Gomez muttered to himself. He hoped the armorers and techs who serviced the Strike Peregrine didn't waste their off-duty time with little squares of brightly colored cardboardy stuff. He hoped, yeah, but he wouldn't have bet more than a grand on it. And you couldn't buy a cup of coffee for a thousand bucks.

One of the noncoms on the ground gave him a thumbs-up. Gomez returned the gesture from the cockpit. Hagopian was a good guy. The Air Force needed more like him. What it needed and what it had were two different critters.

Methodically, Gomez went over the preflight checklist with the F-27's AI. The USA's latest air-superiority fighter had started coming off the assembly line back in the 2050s. It had been a worldbeater back then. Ever since, it had got upgrades to the weaponry and the avionics and to its stealthiness. It was a much more capable warplane now than it had been when it was new.

But was it capable enough to go up against all the goodies the Chinese could throw at it? The last time American fighter-bombers tried to plaster the Channel Islands, hardly any of them came back. Gomez's Strike Peregrine carried some Ukrainian biocores the USA hadn't known about during the last skirmish. Now if only China had stood still . . .

"Check completed. All systems green. Aircraft ready for takeoff," the AI told Dmitri. The voice was female and highly competent—it was as if you were getting a clean bill of health from a doctor.

"Another stupid mission. You know you're toast." That was a female voice, too—a female voice right out of a porn vid. The F-27's cockpit emphatically did not have room for two. It barely had room for one. The avatar that materialized there solved the problem by sitting on Gomez's lap and wiggling. He could feel her, too. It was like . . . having a girl sit on your lap and wiggle. It was distracting as hell, or maybe a skosh worse than that.

Dmitri didn't understand how avatars worked. Nobody on the American mainland—except maybe a few Chinese spies—did. They violated most of the known laws of physics. Which proved . . . what, exactly? That Americans didn't know enough laws of physics, it looked like, and some of the ones they thought they did know weren't so.

"Get lost," Gomez told the avatar.

"You're cute," she answered. "Wanna get . . . Real?"

"No! Jesus Christ, no!" Wouldn't that be just what he needed?—getting doped out of his skull when he was supposed to be flying a combat mission. Even the hottest Ukrainian biocores couldn't save a plane from a fucked-up pilot.

The avatar pouted. "Spoilsport," she said, and winked out. Dmitri breathed an enormous sigh of relief. It wasn't just that he could see the HUD again, though that sure didn't hurt. But if avatars could show up in fighter cockpits, where *couldn't* they?

Anywhere?

A dozen F-27s roared down the airstrip. They sprang into the cool night sky one after another. With afterburner and strap-on rocket packs, a Strike Peregrine could climb to the edge of space. They'd be making this attack run at treetop height, maybe lower. That would keep Chinese radar from picking them up.

Of course, their updated stealth materials were supposed to do the same thing. Engineers claimed an F-27 had a radar profile about the size of a starling's. Dmitri wasn't sure he believed that—how many starlings could break Mach 1 in low-level flight? Still, the profile had to be pretty goddamn small. In that case, why was everybody so tight-assed about staying low, low, low?

Or maybe the question should have been, why didn't the F-27s that hit the Channel Islands the last time come back to Edwards? Maybe the Chinese weren't using radar. If they weren't, whatever they used instead worked even better.

Dmitri tried to shove that cheery thought out of his mind. He'd just about succeeded when the avatar appeared in the cockpit again.

It had to be impossible, even though it was happening. He knew that made no sense. But nothing made any sense. He was doing umpty-hundred knots and jinking like a butterfly with turbofans. No projection could get in here, let alone stay in here. No way, nohow.

Except the avatar did. "Wanna . . . get Real?"

"No!" he yelled again. Laughing one hell of a sexy laugh, the avatar reached under his flight helmet—which should have been impossible squared—and put *something* on his right temple. "No!" he screamed one more time. He couldn't *see* the little cardboard square, but you didn't need to see *everything*, did you? Nope. Some things, you could take on faith.

He was a great horned owl, gliding over the landscape looking for mice. He could feel the wind whistling through his flight feathers, feel his powerful breast muscles work, wingbeat after effortless wingbeat. His eyes drank in even the tiniest sip of light. When he turned his head, he could almost—*al*most—twist it straight back. Every so often, he did. *What a cool way to check six*, he thought . . . owlishly.

His ears, though, his ears were *really* something. If you could imagine hearing in color, in high definition . . . He'd never imagined anything like that before. But then, he'd never been an owl before. Had he?

Somewhere down below, a mouse scurried. Those incredible ears picked it up first. Then he got it on visual, and banked toward it. The ground swelled up as he extended his talons. *They can run*, he thought, *but they can't hide*.

Shapur Razmara was doing paperwork. The cop was cussing under his breath as

he did it, too. This was the twenty-second century, for crying out loud. When were people going to get the flying cars and the vacations on Venus and the paperwork that did itself? How long had the bullshit artists been promising all that good stuff? And how much had they delivered?

"Venus, my ass," he muttered. He would have liked a vacation anywhere. Tijuana, for instance. Fat chance, with the dollar so weak against the peso. More people were sneaking across the border from the USA to Mexico than the other way around. One more sign the country was really and truly fucked up.

And, of course, there was a war on. The TV and the Net and the blogosphere were all screaming their stupid heads off. They were promising America would kick China into the middle of next week. Lieutenant Razmara had no time to waste on such crap. He figured that, if you did have time to waste on such crap, it had to be because you weren't doing your job.

Explosions in the distance? Jet planes roaring by six inches above the roof? Well, yeah. There *was* a war on. As long as nothing blew up right across the street, Razmara figured he wouldn't get his knickers in a twist.

Then, after a scream of engine noise that made his fillings dance the fandango, something *did* blow up across the street. The cop shop shook as if somebody'd kicked *it* into the middle of next week. The lights went out. So did the AC. In East Los Angeles in the middle of summer, that was even more important. Cops and clericals swore antiphonally.

After a pause, and then a pause on the pause, emergency lights came on. "Move to the stairways!" a loud recorded voice commanded. "Exit the facility in an orderly fashion!"

Move to the stairways? Razmara wondered, even as he did it. Los Angeles was crowded, sure, but *that* crowded? Well, no. Just somebody talking like a bureaucrat instead of a human being.

He exited the facility in an orderly fashion, too. Then he stopped dead and said, "Aw, fuck!"

A fighter plane's tail stuck out of the roof of what had been a Korean takeout place: the perfect business to put across the street from a police station. It wasn't perfect any more, not unless perfectly wrecked counted. The takeout joint and the plane both burned like billy-be-damned. Every so often, something would blow up—something off the plane, Razmara presumed.

Stas Kyriades came up beside him to watch the fireworks. "So much for the *bul kalbi*," Kyriades said mournfully.

"No shit, Jackson!" Razmara agreed.

Something else blew up. A secretary maybe twenty feet from the two cops screeched and went down, clutching her leg. Somebody stooped beside her and started giving first aid. "You know, we're lucky," Kyriades said.

"Some luck!" Razmara rolled his eyes.

"We are, man," the sergeant insisted. "Honest to God. Think about it—another split second, and that sumbitch hits the station instead of the Korean place. Then we all go up in smoke."

"Urk," Razmara said—he hadn't thought of that. He wished like hell Stas hadn't, either. "Thanks a lot, pal. Now when I do the instant replay inside my head . . ."

"Yeah, I know." Kyriades nodded, the firelight from across the street shining off his big bald dome. "Me, too."

"Damn!" One of the Chinese sergeants in a tent outside of Avalon stubbed out his cigarette in disgust.

"What's the matter?" asked the captain in charge of the company.

"I had 'em. I had 'em dead to rights, and I missed," the sergeant said. His superior made an impatient noise. Grudgingly—miserable nosy officers!—the sergeant explained: "I had the fighter pilot netted pretty as you please. I wanted to fly him into the police station and take out the Americans who were working against the getting Real complex."

"And you missed?" the captain said.

"Afraid so, sir. I'm still picking up the police officials." The sergeant hated to admit it. The small-prick bastard with the four little stars on his shoulder boards would probably put it in his fitness report, and then he'd be stuck with it forever.

The captain rubbed his chin. "But you did take out the fighter plane and the pilot?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" the sergeant said. "No doubt of it."

"All right. That will do," the captain said. "The other would have been nice, but you did what you had to do."

"Thank you, sir!" the sergeant exclaimed in glad surprise. Maybe a human being lurked inside the small-prick bastard. Maybe. Who would have believed it?

"The police officials are a worry for another day. Probably for another department, too." Human being or not, the captain still enjoyed pointing out the obvious. That was part of what made him a small-prick bastard. He also liked to hear himself talk, which sure didn't help. He went on, "If the pilot had got close enough, he might have endangered us. After all, a savage with a bow and arrow can endanger a chaingun crew if he gets close enough."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said resignedly. None of the American fighter planes had got close enough to Catalina or the other Channel Islands to endanger them. This whole unit—captain, sergeant, and everybody else, right down to the cooks—would have landed in big trouble if any of them had.

Reeducation? the sergeant thought. He shivered, though the night was mild. *No thanks!*

Snow swirled around Pablo. It had lain on the ground for a while; it had a crust, and crunched under his felt boots at every step. The air was *cold*. Each breath felt like inhaling crême de menthe. Somewhere up ahead, the enemy lurked. They'd be tough. They always were.

This time, though, Pablo had a trusty comrade at his side. The tall, gray-eyed barbarian swaggered along as if he owned this valley. He carried a massive battle axe. His shoulders seemed too wide to fit inside his wolfskin coat. Like all the men of his clan, he shaved his head. A fox-fur cap kept him from losing precious warmth through his scalp.

The barbarian pointed toward a stand of snow-dappled firs ahead. In their perfect conical symmetry, they reminded Pablo of oversized Christmas trees. (Christmas trees? Just for a moment, the world seemed to waver around Pablo. Then he got Real again. External references and doubts vanished together.)

"They'll be in there," the massive axeman growled.

Pablo nodded. "They will." He drew the blade that had drunk a dragon's heart-blood. "Let's go get 'em."

"Indeed," his companion said. "For great glory and great reward await us once we triumph. If we triumph. The fight will be hard."

"They always are," Pablo said. (The world wavered again. Had he been in fights against these foes before? This terrain seemed new to him. And yet . . . He shook his head. Whatever the submerged maybe-memory was, it wasn't Real—and if it wasn't Real, it didn't matter.)

Then the dwarves burst from the wood, howling their harsh battle hymns. Some had the features of black men, some of whites, and some of men with yellow skins.

All were hideous. The big shaven-headed man by Pablo roared laughter. "May the gods smite me if those little warts don't put me in mind of the ministers in a kingdom I left not long ago," he said.

Jackson. Berkowitz. Kojima. The names rose unbidden in Pablo's mind. Again, they might have blown in on a chilly breeze from another world. *Stupid square must not be right where it oughta go.* That thought also came out of nowhere. And it went right back to nowhere a moment later, for he was fighting for his life.

The dwarves might be little. They might be ugly. But they were fast and mean and brave. If they could have chopped his companion and him into cat's-meat, they would have done it.

But they couldn't. Gushing gore splashed the snow. Butchered body parts bounced. Pablo took a nasty cut on the forearm. He felt that as he felt everything else—it was all Real, of course. Still, it troubled him less than it might have, for battle fury filled him.

He and his comrade-in-arms worked a fearful, fearsome slaughter on the dwarves. At last, their foes had had more than flesh and blood could bear. They fled, shrieking in terror and throwing away swords and spears so they could run faster.

"Pretty good, friend," the big man panted. His axehead was all over blood. He had a gash on one cheek; a dark wet patch on his trouser leg marked another. Both wounds would be annoying. Neither was anything worse.

"You ain't bad, neither," Pablo said.

They plunged into the fir forest. Who could say what kind of treasures the dwarves held? Who could guess how many women they'd stolen from human lands to serve their lusts and, later, to serve as the main course in their foul feasts? Who could imagined how overjoyed those women would be at rescue?

The treasures were splendid. Some of the women were better, much better, than splendid. *Overjoyed* didn't begin to describe how glad they were. Furs and fires meant the snow all around didn't matter one bit. And every single thing Pablo did felt Real.

Jamming and spoofing gear filled the USS *Rumsfeld*. The hovercraft was designed to do one thing and one thing only: get in quick, tear the holy hell out of the target, and then get out again. One of Hillary Griffith's shipmates said, "Fat lot of good jamming and spoofing did the real Rumsfeld."

"Who was he?" Hillary asked. She'd been born not long before the turn of the century. The ship was way older than she was. It was probably older than the grizzled CPO doing the talking, too. As far as Hillary was concerned, that made it ancient.

"He was the clown who sucked us into Iraq," the chief answered.

"Oh. Which time?" she asked—anything that had happened before she was born was as one with Nineveh and Tyre, as far as she was concerned.

"Um, the second one . . . I think." That the CPO wasn't sure made her feel better. He waved to the bank of sensors she monitored. "You sing out like Timberlake if anything looks even a little bit weird. Even a little, hear?"

"Will do, Chief," Hillary promised. And she would, too. Her one and only personal, irreplaceable ass was on the line, same as everybody else's.

Goosed hard, the *Rumsfeld* could make sixty-three knots. The captain was goosing the hovercraft extra hard. Shoot and scoot. That was what she had to do. If she didn't, she'd never see Long Beach again.

Hillary's gaze flicked from one dial to another, restless and random as a hummingbird buzzing a blooming hibiscus. Most of the sensors were passive: they warned if somebody else's search beams went by. Chances were the skipper would turn on the active sensors only after he knew the enemy had already detected the

Rumsfeld. Yes, they could see farther and in more detail than their passive counterparts. But they also shouted *Here I am! Here I am!* at the top of their electronic lungs.

She just hoped the passive detectors could pick up everything the Chinese would throw at them. People said they used electronic and acoustic bands American gear couldn't find. People said some of the bands they used weren't electronic or acoustic at all. Then again, people came out with all kinds of bullshit. If you had any sense, you bozo-filtered most of it.

But she did worry about why neither the military nor the media said more about the American air strikes against the Channel Islands. There'd been all that hot video of the Strike Peregrines taking off. Anybody could see they were loaded for bear. All those bombs and missiles hanging down . . . And they would have had Wild Weasels flying cover missions for them, to make sure the enemy couldn't detect them till too late.

Much fanfare about the takeoffs. Not word one about what the F-27s had done. Hillary might be young, but she hadn't come to town on a turnip truck. She could see what the likely answer there was. She didn't like it, not for beans, but she could see it.

Well, if the planes hadn't done the job, the *Rumsfeld* would just have to. Hillary reached out and patted the displays in front of her. A ship could carry a much more comprehensive electronics suite than an airplane. They had the most up-to-date gadgets the USA could manufacture or buy. Of course they'd get through.

Not getting through was too grim to be worth thinking about.

None of the displays had so much as hiccuped when the 105mm gun in the forward turret started banging away. "The fuck—?" Hillary said. They weren't close to Catalina yet. As far as she could tell, they were alone on the Pacific. So why was that 105 firing, for Chrissake? Had somebody flipped out? *That* would be just what they needed!

"Battle stations!" the intercom shouted. The horn call that went with the words started—but then cut out. But the displays still had power. *What a weird glitch*, Hillary thought.

She didn't have to move. Her battle station was right here. That was the good news. The bad news was, she was stuck monitoring display screens and she couldn't see one goddamn thing besides them. If it hit the fan, she wouldn't know till it all landed on her.

The engines slowed. By the way they sounded, they went into full emergency stop. Something had hit the fan, damned if it hadn't.

"Anything on the threat displays?" The skipper's voice came out of a brass speaking tube, not the intercom. You needed backups, but. . . .

"No, sir." Hillary shouted her answer up the tube. "Uh, sir—what's going on?"

"We're about to run into a giant brick wall that just sprang up out of nowhere," the skipper answered.

"That's impossible, sir," Hillary said.

"Yeah. I know," the captain said bleakly. The *Rumsfeld* smashed into the wall a split second later.

Hillary was wearing a seat belt. When you went into combat, you never could tell what would happen. She ended up on the deck anyway. She didn't go face-first into the screens. That was something, but not enough, not when she ended up clutching one wrist with the other hand. Was it broken? If it wasn't, it might as well have been—it sure hurt enough.

She heard running feet in the corridor. "Did we get the abandon-ship order?" she called.

"We're sinking," the other sailor answered. "If you want to hang around, be my guest."

Deciding they wouldn't court-martial her or keelhaul her or whatever the hell, Hillary went up to the main deck. The *Rumsfeld* was built light—she was made for boogying. The bow looked exactly as if it had run into a brick wall at high speed. It was all smashed in, in other words.

But where was the wall? Yeah, it was night out there, but Hillary thought she would have seen a brick wall big enough to smash in a warship's bow. All she saw were a whale of a lot of ocean and a million stars overhead.

"Boy, are we gonna have fun explaining *this* one," a sailor said gloomily.

"That fuckin' wall was *there*," another sailor insisted.

"Where's it at now?" the first swabbie asked. The second didn't answer.

Shipmates helped Hillary into a life raft. She couldn't have made it alone, not with only one good hand. They started the one-lung engine and headed east, toward the mainland. Maybe they'd get there. Maybe a Chinese patrol would pick them up before they could. Maybe they'd run into another brick wall. Hillary had no idea. She hardly cared. All she knew for sure was, they weren't going to shell Catalina. Behind her, the *Rumsfeld* quietly sank.

When Pablo came back to the real world in the jailhouse infirmary, two cops were glaring at him. They couldn't have been anything else. Sure as hell, the one with hair asked, "Was it you or your buddy who smuggled in that shit?"

"I don't got to talk to you, man." Pablo had been jugged before. He knew the rules.

"We've got it on video," the bald cop warned.

"Terrific. You got it on video. Then you don't need to ask me no dumbass questions."

"You come clean with us, maybe we don't hang a sentence enhancement on you. Drugs in jail—could double your stretch." That was the one with hair again. They were trying to whipsaw him.

They were trying hard. The bald guy added, "Drugs in jail in time of war. That's a sentence enhancement, too. A big one."

Was it? Pablo had never been in jail in time of war before. His bullshit detector went off just the same. "Getting Real—that ain't no drug," he said. "It's . . . different, like."

"It's illegal," the cop with hair said implacably. "And it comes from China. You use that shit, it's . . . treason, like." He did a wickedly good job of mimicking the way Pablo talked.

"Oh, yeah? How come you never busted nobody for treason before on account of he got Real?" Sure as hell, Pablo's BS detector was pinging like crazy.

"You aren't listening, *baka* boy—there's a war on now," the bald cop said. "Besides, you may as well come clean with us. Eckener's already trying to pin everything on you."

Eckener? Pablo needed a few seconds to realize that had to be the big dude with the mean eyes. He hadn't had a name for him till now. "That lying fuck!" he burst out. Then his brains really kicked in. "Besides, if you got the video, you already know he's a lying fuck."

The cops looked at each other. They'd figured he was too dumb or too wasted to see that. But Pablo's mama didn't raise any dummies. And you weren't wasted when you came back from getting Real. Disgusted, maybe, the way Pablo was now, but not wasted. His brains could work just fine.

Wearily, the cop with hair asked, "Why do you do it, Ramirez?"

"Why do I do what, man?" Pablo wouldn't make things easy for him. That was more a matter of principle than anything else.

Even more wearily, the cop spelled it out in words of one syllable: "Why do you get Real?"

"Ever done it?" As long as Pablo answered one question with another, he wouldn't spill anything that mattered—not that he had much to spill.

After the cops looked at each other again, they both shook their heads. "We've got real lives we like," the bald one said. The one with hair nodded.

Pablo just laughed. "Like that's got anything to do with anything. I like real life okay, too. But getting Real—it's better." Okay, he was talking to them. He was talking, period. What the hell, though? It wasn't like they wouldn't already have heard this shit plenty of times from other people.

"Better how?" asked the cop with hair.

"Just . . . better, man. Realer." Pablo laughed some more. "Yeah. It's Realer than real, it's more interesting than what happens just every day. I mean, I don't hardly never kill no dragons strollin' down Whittier Boulevard, you know? I don't save no beautiful girls who screw me till I can't stand up no more, neither. Do *you*?"

"Sure. Every day," the cop answered, deadpan.

"Twice on Sundays," his bald partner added.

Smart guys. He might've known they'd be smart guys. They were cops, weren't they? But, now that Pablo'd started talking, he didn't want to shut up. "And everything that happens when you're Real—it's Real, like. Ordinary times, you don't notice half of what's going on. What the ground feels like under your feet. What your clothes feel like against your skin. What the air smells like. What the air *tastes* like."

"In L.A., you don't want to know stuff like that," the cop with hair said.

"Yeah, you do," Pablo insisted. "When you eat, you *taste* food, too. And when you're with a girl . . . Wow!" He shivered at the ecstatic intensity of some of his memories. They felt more genuine than anything that had actually happened to him. And if a memory *felt* genuine, *wasn't* it genuine? A memory wasn't a thing; it was the calling back to life of a gone thing. He couldn't find a way to put that into words. He did say, "When you're . . . here, man, it's like you're only half alive. The wrong half, too."

He waited for the cops to hammer away at him some more. But they just got up and walked out of the infirmary. A little later, two blank-faced guards marched him to a cell of his own. No bunkmate. No getting Real, not unless an avatar showed up out of nowhere. He was stuck with the world as it actually was. In nothing flat, he was bored out of his skull.

Hu Zhiaoxing arranged a video hookup with the American dignitaries. When you were at war, you didn't meet face to face unless one side was giving up. Hu thought that was a stupid rule, but it was the one the Americans played by.

"By now," he said, "you will have seen that your attacks cannot harm us. They have cost you casualties and damage, but here I stay in Avalon, as safe and comfortable as if you had never started your foolish war."

"You can't talk to us that way!" the American Secretary of Defense raged. "You have no right!" The glowers from Secretary Jackson and Secretary Kojima said they agreed with Berkowitz.

Agreeing didn't make them right. Minister Hu gave back a sweet, sad smile. "Centuries ago, my ancestors said the same thing to Western envoys. And Western gunboats and cannons and rifles, weapons we could not match, taught my ancestors that might makes right."

"Just what they deserved, too!" Jackson exclaimed. This time, Berkowitz and Kojima nodded like bobbleheads. They might be the USA's top officials, but they showed no understanding of history. Well, that had been an American failing for a long time.

One of many—and the Americans also showed no understanding that failings had

a price. Hu Zhiaoxing's voice hardened: "If you settle now—if you concede that we may distribute Real squares and other such artifacts within your borders as we see fit, if you agree that Chinese citizens arrested in the USA will be tried in Chinese courts to ensure fairness, and if you pay a moderate indemnity for disturbing the peace—we will end the unfortunate hostilities on these mild and gentle terms."

"We'll see you in hell first!" Kojima shouted. "You have to keep that poison out of our country, and we'll keep fighting till you do!" By their savage expressions, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Defense supported the Secretary of the DEA.

That was too bad—for them, and for their country. "Are you sure this is your last word?" Hu asked, genuine concern in his voice. He liked Americans. He admired what America had been. That its own people refused to realize it no longer was what it had been saddened him. One more failing that had a price. "Please reconsider," he urged. "If things go on, a time will come when I have to speak of terms once more. At that time, my government won't let me be so generous. We will have had to do more, and so we will require more from you."

"The President's told the American people we're going to win," Jackson said. "We won't back down. We can't back down. It won't be long before you're singing a different tune."

Ironically, what first occurred to Third Minister Hu was a passage from the Christian Bible: *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*. Well, if they didn't know, they would have to find out. "I am afraid I see no point to carrying this conversation any further at the moment," he said sadly, breaking the connection.

He had to fight the impulse to go into the next room and wash his hands.

Lieutenant Razmara was dictating a report into the transcriber in the middle of the afternoon when the cop shop lost power again. This time, no fighter jet had crashed across the street. Quietly and without any fuss, things just stopped working. "Crap," he said—he hadn't saved for a while, so he was out a couple of pages' worth of work.

Other officers offered their detailed opinions of the situation. Most of them sounded as thrilled as he was. Some seemed even more delighted.

Windows still worked, anyhow—he could see. He pulled out his cell phone to see if he could find out how long the outage would last. But the screen stayed blank when he thumbed the ON button. "Crap!" he said again, this time with feeling. Hadn't he charged the stupid thing last night? He knew damn well he had.

So how come it wasn't working, then? A rising tide of profanity from desks all over the office told him his wasn't the only dead cell, either—not even close. The station was unusual in still having landlines. It had them for the same reason it had emergency lights and backup generators: to keep it going if something went kaflooie.

When Razmara picked up the landline on his desk, all he got was silence. Come to think of it, the emergency lights hadn't come on this time. The backup generators weren't generating, either. For all he knew, they'd *de*generated since the last time anybody bothered to inspect them.

Stas Kyriades ambled over to his desk. "I don't like it that *everything* electric is out," the sergeant said.

"Neither do I—not even slightly," Razmara said. "I wish I could think of something that might make that happen."

An avatar appeared in the middle of the office. It had to be an avatar. He didn't think a woman with bright blue hair and bright red eyes, wearing a hot-pink Victorian-era dress, complete with bustle, could have just walked in without anybody noticing. It was L.A., so you couldn't be a hundred percent sure, but all the same. . . .

"If you can get out of town, you'd better do it." The avatar had a raspy baritone

voice that suggested thirty years of cheap cigars. What was going on with *that*? Either a programming glitch or a Chinese with a one twisted sense of humor. The avatar looked around and nodded. "Yeah, you'd better bail. Your dumbshit government's really screwed the pooch, and L.A.'s gonna pay for it. I know that sucks, but life sucks sometimes. You've got"—the avatar glanced down at a wristwatch she/he/it wasn't wearing— "two hours. Two and a half, tops."

"Why are you telling us?" Razmara said, at the same time as somebody else was asking, "Why should we believe you?"

"Well, if you want to believe your own stupid, fucked-up people, you can do that. But you'll be sorry," the avatar said. "I mean, if your own people had all their shit in one bag, you wouldn't've lost power here, right? Right."

"How can we go anywhere if all the power's out?" Stas Kyriades called.

The avatar shrugged. "Unicycle? Horse? Elephant? Feet? All kinds of ways, sucker. Hey! Who wants to get Real?" Without waiting for an answer, the thing started throwing little cardboard squares all over the office. Then it thumbed its nose and vanished.

One of the squares, a bright blue one—about the color of the avatar's hair—landed on Shapur Razmara's desk. He stared at it as if it were an Ebola bomb or a vest-pocket nuke. "Waddaya think we oughta do?" Kyriades asked.

Razmara's chair squeaked when he pushed it back from the desk. "Get the hell out of here." He headed for the stairs.

The sergeant followed him. "What if this is all bullshit? What if we're freaking on account of nothing?"

"Then how come the power's out—the power *and* our phones?" Razmara asked. "If they want to can my sorry ass for cowardice, they can do that. I'll get another job. I can't get another ass."

"Yeah . . ." Kyriades followed him down the stairs, too. He tried his cell again. It remained resolutely dead. "Shit. Wish I could call Sophie."

"Maybe she'll get an avatar, too," Razmara said, wishing he had somebody who mattered that much to him.

"Yeah . . ." Kyriades said again, sounding surprised. "Maybe she will."

Out on the street, all the cars and trucks, hydrogen and electric alike, were dead. So was an ancient gasoline-burner. Some drivers were peering under the hood. One gal was kicking her machine. That made as much sense as anything else, and did as much good.

"Which way do we go?" Kyriades asked.

"They gotta come from the coast," Razmara answered. "So if we head north, like toward Pasadena, we're moving away from 'em, anyhow. Maybe that'll do some good, maybe it won't. But it looks like the best shot to me."

"Makes sense." The other cop paused. "But when you see an avatar like that one, you start wondering how much sense making sense makes."

"Right," Razmara said. "C'mon."

Before long—right about the time Razmara's feet started to hurt—they walked past a bike shop. Actually, instead of walking past, they walked in. A million dollars later, they rode away on two cheap bicycles. Razmara would have liked to know what time it was, but his cell stayed out. Kyriades had a wristwatch . . . which was also out. They started getting scared then. The only people in L.A. who knew what time it was were antiques freaks with windup clocks and watches. And . . .

"I'm glad I'm not on the operating table right now," Razmara said. Kyriades made a horrible face. They both pedaled harder.

Well, they tried to. Bikes were nimble critters, but traffic still bit the big one. They were riding past Caltech when Kyriades looked back over his shoulder. "Oh, fuck," he

said, and hit the brakes. Razmara was glad for an excuse to stop. Both out-of-shape, middle-aged cops were sweating like pigs.

Then Razmara looked back over *his* shoulder. "Jesus Christ!" he said once more. Yeah, he was assimilated. Better to assimilate than never. Or something like that.

What looked like an almost-clear dome had been plopped down onto L.A. Not an inversion layer. More like a Pyrex bowl you'd nuke veggies in. God's Pyrex bowl, upside down on top of Los Angeles. God must've been an even bigger dude than Razmara figured. The leading edge of the bowl-thing was like eight blocks behind them. "Wanna go back and find out what that is?" Kyriades asked.

"Your mother!" Razmara squeeped.

And that was even before lightning started lashing inside the bowl.

Sergeant Chang's superiors had told him the advance under the dome would be a piece of cake. Any sergeant worth his boots knows his superiors are commonly full of crap. Not this time, though.

Here and there, American soldiers in San Pedro fired at the Chinese patrol. So did more than a few American civilians. His superiors had warned that America let civilians freely own guns. Chang Guoliang hadn't wanted to believe it—it struck him as insane—but it seemed to be true.

But he didn't have to worry about ordinary firearms. Reactive metareality armor swatted bullets away before they got within thirty centimeters of his hide. It was the same technology that generated avatars—Chang knew that much. *How* it worked . . . he neither knew nor cared. Till the government conscripted him, he'd worked on his parents' farm in Qinhai Province: almost the exact middle of nowhere. He thought he might make the army a career. He lived a lot better now than he had before the draft got him.

A tongue of fire licked out from a house and engulfed a Chinese soldier. The fancy armor was no damn good against flamethrowers. The poor bastard went up like a moth in a torch. How he screamed!—but, mercifully, not for long.

The Chinese soldiers blasted the house with grenades and energy beams. A defiant minichain burst and another snarl from the flamethrower answered them. This one didn't fry anybody. It just let them know the enemy was still in business.

"If that's how they want it . . ." Chang's platoon commander said. The young lieutenant sent the address higher up the chain of command.

He didn't have to wait long. Lightning cracked down from the lid the Chinese had slapped over most of Los Angeles. Chang Guoliang had to look away from that white-violet brilliance. When he looked back, not much was left of the house.

"That'll fix 'em!" Satisfaction filled Lieutenant Liu's voice.

Chang nodded. He thought so, too. He was amazed when a couple of U.S. soldiers staggered from the wreckage. The Chinese let one of them surrender. The other was dumb enough to keep wearing the flamethrower's fuel and propellant tanks on his back. Hands up or not, he didn't come very far before he got shot down like a mad dog.

Lieutenant Liu said not a word about that, even if it went against regulations. They would have done the same thing to a fellow carrying nerve-gas grenades. If you fought with the wrong kind of weapons, you took your chances. That rule was older than regulations—old as war, probably.

The Chinese patrol, one of many, pressed ahead under the dome, deeper into Los Angeles. No, the round-eyes didn't have anything that could stop them, or even slow them down very much.

After the Pyrex lid went over most of Los Angeles, Lieutenant Razmara's phone started working again. He could call anywhere he wanted to—as long as he didn't

want to call anybody stuck under the lid. Since he didn't want to call anybody who *wasn't*, what good did a working phone do him? Well, he could find out what time it was again. Oh, boy!

Sergeant Kyriades' worries were more urgent than his own. "Can't get through, God damn it to hell," Kyriades snarled, and shoved the phone back into his pocket.

"Sorry, Stas," Razmara said. He wished he cared about somebody enough to go half nuts when he couldn't talk to her. Once upon a time, he had. Once upon a time, Ande (short for Andromeda—her dad was an enthusiastic amateur astronomer) had cared for him that way, too. Then . . . she hadn't. Which ended up expensive and heartbreaking and a bunch of other things he didn't want to think about right now.

He and Kyriades and a bunch of other people who'd got out of L.A. sat under the trees in a Pasadena park. It wasn't an official refugee camp yet, but by all the signs it would be pretty damn quick. A guy was walking around eyeing the setup and talking into his laptop. If he wasn't some kind of official, Shapur Razmara had never set eyes on one.

Or maybe he was a spy for China. But why would the Chinese need one, here or anywhere around L.A.? They were kicking the snot out of the USA, same as they had the last time the two countries tangled.

A squadron of fighter jets had fired missiles at the lid. Some bounced off and smashed. Some blew up when they hit. None wrecked it. It wasn't really made of Pyrex after all. Too bad.

Then a plane had flown straight into the lid. Razmara hoped like hell it was a drone, but he didn't think so. It looked like the rest of the fighters. And it made one amazing fireball when it hit. That was all it did, though. *Only this and nothing more?* Where did *that* come from? An old poem he'd heard somewhere. He could have Googled it and found out what, but he didn't care enough.

Tanks rumbled past the park, heading south toward the lid. So their electrical systems worked here, too, did they? Razmara wished them luck, there inside his head. And he figured they'd need it. What were they going to do that a fighter plane couldn't?

To his surprise, Kyriades had an answer when he asked that out loud. "I'll tell you what," the other cop said. "They're gonna show that the Army is just as fucking stupid as the Air Force."

Nothing Razmara had imagined came as close to making sense as that did. He nodded mournfully. A little later on, the tanks' cannons boomed, one after another. Razmara supposed the blams that followed hard on the heels of the booms were cannon shells ricocheting off the lid.

There were no noises that put him in mind of a million tons of breaking glass. The lid wouldn't *really* be made of Pyrex. It probably wasn't *really* there at all—except that it kept out things like missiles and fighter planes and cannon shells. Oh, yeah, and electricity some kind of way.

How? He had no idea. The wild tribesmen who charged white men's machine guns way back when wouldn't have known how those worked, either. Which didn't keep those poor bastards from dying by carload lots. And also didn't keep the shoe from being on the other foot now.

He nudged Kyriades. "How's it feel to be a wog, Stas?"

"Huh?" Stas didn't get it. Well, he would. Pretty soon, the whole country would.

Wang Zemin nodded to Hu Zhiaoxing. "Here comes the Americans' boat, Minister."

"Yes, I see it," Hu said. The boat came up from the southeast, from Laguna Beach: the closest port that hadn't gone under the Chinese lid. Now that the Americans were asking for terms, they had to come to him.

The boat flew a large white flag and a much smaller Stars and Stripes. A breeze

from the ocean ruffled Hu's hair, just a little, as he waited for the boat to tie up in Avalon and for the dignitaries to climb the gangplank and come up onto the pier. The Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Secretary of the DEA all hung their heads. They'd just got their noses rubbed in a nasty truth. No matter how mighty their nation had been in the old days, no matter how glorious its history, it couldn't compete any more.

"Why are you here, gentlemen?" Third Minister Hu made himself sound like a stern master dressing down naughty schoolboys.

None of the Americans wanted to come out with it. The Secretary of State was the senior man, so the unpalatable duty fell to him. Unpalatable indeed—Jackson spoke as if each word tasted bad: "We want to know what we have to do so you'll end the war."

"The war the United States started." Hu folded his arms and waited.

Miserably, Jackson nodded. "The war the United States started," he choked out.

Hu Zhiaoxing could have taken them to a conference room and sat down with them and talked things over. Instead, he gestured to his aide. Wang Zemin quickly fetched him a chair. He sat down, and left the three Americans standing in front of him. "First, the United States will place no further restrictions on Chinese distribution, by sale or gift, of the entertainment known as getting Real. All criminal and civil penalties against it will also be declared null and void."

"Entertainment?" Kojima exploded. "That horrible, vicious, corrupting, addictive shit? We ought to—"

"We accept," Berkowitz broke in. Jackson nodded again. The Secretaries of State and Defense could at least recognize things when they got hit over the head. The Secretary of the DEA didn't seem to need to get Real to be delusional.

"Very good," Hu said. "Next, China will take a ninety-nine year lease on the ports of San Pedro and Long Beach, to the borders indicated on this map"—he handed the Americans a printout—"the payment for the lease to be one dollar a year." In other words, nothing: the smallest U.S. coin was a little aluminum piece worth ten dollars. But the humiliation was a lesson in itself.

Jackson spluttered: "These are our busiest West Coast ports! Some of the busiest ports in the world!"

"I know." Minister Hu smiled politely. "Would you rather we go on with the war?"

"We accept," Berkowitz repeated. No, he wasn't altogether blind.

"Excellent. I hoped you would," Hu said. "Third, there shall be no tariff barriers on exports from this new territory to the United States. China reserves the right to impose duties on products imported from the United States to the new territory."

"You're screwing us coming and going!" Berkowitz blurted.

"We did not start the war. You did," Hu reminded him. "And, because you did, China imposes on the United States an indemnity of twenty trillion dollars, to be paid in gold or petroleum or uranium or a hard currency to be agreed upon, said indemnity to be completely discharged within ten years."

"We haven't got it," Jackson said bleakly.

"In that case, you will get it." Hu prided himself on his command of idiomatic English. "Failure to pay will result in more territorial or economic sanctions." He could also be remorselessly precise.

"This is a very harsh peace, and a most unjust one," Secretary of State Jackson said.

"My government does not think so. Neither do I. I warned you to quit sooner, but you would not listen." Hu gestured to Wang Zemin, who handed him two copies of the agreement. He turned back to the Americans. "Here is the text, in English and Chinese. In case of doubt, the Chinese version is authoritative." He signed both

copies, then held them out to Jackson. Glumly, the Secretary of State added his signature and kept one copy for his government.

"You're gloating now, because you think getting Real is only putting the screws to us," Kojima said in a low, furious voice. "But just you wait. It'll bite you in the ass, too. You'll see."

Hu Zhiaoxing yawned in his face. "I assure you, we have more enjoyable amusements than *that*. Good day, gentlemen." His tone said he hoped he never saw them again. And he did.

Spotlights blazed down on Pablo. There seemed to be a thousand, in a hundred coruscating colors. He looked out toward the seats, but the glare of the spots kept him from seeing a goddamn thing.

He didn't care. The shrill squeals told him the crowd was hot and ready. He picked up his axe and started to play. God, how they roared! But he was a god himself, god of thunder and lightning, god of thrusting hips and flying fingers, god of lust and sex, god of cell lights and sinsemilla, god of everything that mattered if you were a guy and you hadn't seen thirty yet.

He was good. He was the best. Would they have laid out a million bucks apiece for a ticket if he were anything less? Not fuckin' likely! He made it wail. He made it scream. He made the girls scream, too. He made 'em scream without even touching 'em. How hot was that? There they were, creaming their panties by the thousands in the seats, by the millions in front of their TVs, by the hundreds of millions tomorrow when the vids hit the Net.

If anything was better than sex, this was it. Not just fame, but the rush of fame. Knowing you made the girls wanna squirm, wanna do the old up-and-down, the old in-and-out . . . Knowing you made 'em wanna do it with *you* . . .

And if nothing was better than sex, there was always after the show. He couldn't give everything he had to all the girls he wanted. John Henry the Steel-Driving Man couldn't give it to all the girls Pablo the Guitar God wanted. But he could sure as hell pick and choose from all the girls who wanted to give him everything *they* had. And he could go pretty goddamn good even if he couldn't nail 'em all.

Blonde, brunette, redhead? Big tits, round ass, long legs? English or Spanish? White, brown, black, Asian? Here, there, or the other place? Sweet or sassy? He'd have plenty of choices. That was part of the perks of being Pablo the Guitar God.

He finished his first number. More screams rained down on him, along with frenzied applause. "Thank you! Thank you very much!" he said, and the amps made his words fill the arena. He waved—and got more cheers. He grinned—and the big screens behind him showed his shining front teeth even to the poor fools way up top in Row ZZ. "Boy, this feels good!"

It felt better than good, as a matter of fact. It felt Real. . . .

Not without regret, Pablo opened his eyes. No, nobody'd hauled him off to jail while he was under this time. Nobody would have, any which way. Not any more. He'd got Real in his own apartment. Here he was, lying on his own bed.

But he could have got Real on a street corner, and they wouldn't have busted him. It was all of a sudden legal. With lots of things, that would have taken half the fun—more than half—away. Not with getting Real. It was too good for anything to mess up, just like sex. . . .

A slow, reminiscent smile spread across his face. "Pablo the Guitar God," he murmured, and then, "*Yeah*, baby!" He remembered all the stuff he'd done after the show, and the babes he'd done it with. When you got Real, you remembered everything afterwards. That was part of what made it so totally awesome.

He'd never gone down this particular road before. His Real brain usually spun different kinds of fantasies. Not that he was complaining. Oh, man, no! He wondered why you sometimes went one way, sometimes another. Was somebody, something steering you? Or did you do it all yourself, there inside the universe between your ears?

"Jeez, who cares?" he muttered.

When he got Real, he was a deadly swordsman. Did that turn him into a fencer in the mundane world? He shrugged. He'd never had the faintest interest in finding out. If you turned into a killer whale when you got Real, it didn't mean you could stay underwater for twenty minutes at a stretch unless you had scuba gear. More than one dumbshit had drowned proving stuff like that.

Guitar god, though . . . He sorta knew how to play, but only sorta. He got out of bed and assumed the position for air guitar. He tried it out. Was he faster and better than he'd ever been before? Had getting Real turned a key some kind of way? He wasn't sure, but he thought so. And if it had . . .

If it had, he needed to find out with a no-shit axe, not a pretend one. He needed to do it in a hurry, too. If you were terrific with a sword, who gave a rat's ass? But Pablo the Guitar God could have every bit as much fun in plain old ordinary L.A. as he could when he got Real. And how could you beat that? Simple, man—you couldn't. No fuckin' way.

Hu Zhiaoxing let out a long sigh of relief. The stupid Americans had kicked up another fuss, and he'd handled it. The big wheels in Beijing couldn't piss and moan about the job he'd done, not with a foothold on the mainland and the unchallenged right to spread getting Real as widely as China pleased.

So his next posting wouldn't be as mayor in some dusty town in Xinjiang Uygur. It wouldn't be as a camp administrator up on the Kolyma, either. China found the gold mines by the Arctic Ocean to be as useful for disposing of unreliables as the USSR had back in the twentieth century. Running them was necessary work, but not work Hu wanted.

Right this minute, he wanted no work at all. He wanted to relax. He'd damn well earned the right. And so he would.

Getting Real . . . As he had with the Secretary of the DEA, he snorted his contempt. That was fine if you liked loud noises and primary colors. Fine for Americans, in other words. But there were better ways, if you had the taste to appreciate them.

He lit the spirit lamp on the low table in his Avalon apartment. He lay on a couch in front of the lamp, his head resting on a hard pillow of leather-colored bamboo. Everything he needed was within easy reach.

With the sharp end of the brass dipper, he twirled up some of the sticky mass above the dish and, still twirling to make sure it didn't fall off, he began to roast it over the lamp. Every motion had the smoothness of long practice. He didn't want the mass to dry out too much—or, worse, to burn. Then he'd have to start again from scratch.

Every so often, he took it off the lamp and rolled it on the flat bowl of his long-stemmed pipe. When it was ready, he heated the center of the bowl and the dipper to stick the seed-sized mass just above the hole there.

Time to smoke. With the end of the stem in his mouth, he put the bowl above the lamp. As soon as the pellet started to frizzle, he inhaled deeply, three or four times. Opium smoke filled his lungs.

"Ahhh!" he said at last. The smoke flowed out through his nose and mouth as tranquillity flowed through him. Tranquil was better, ever so much better, than Real. Nodding at that transcendent truth, Minister Hu slowly began to prepare another pellet. ❍

Long Live the King!

In a certain sense, Jack Kirby is the Miles Davis of comics.

Now, Jack Kirby—by all accounts a gentle prince among men when not riled—had none of Davis's nasty disposition, and was certainly to be found more toward the square end of the cultural spectrum than the hipster end. But in terms of his lasting effect on his art form, and his ability to remake the field around him, and his lateral thinking, he and Miles Davis are cut from the same cloth. Sheer talent is not enough to distinguish such a creator. Plenty of people have been as talented as Kirby or Davis on the level of sheer technical chops. It's more the visionary uniqueness of their art, a forceful presentation that imposes itself on colleagues and audience, reshaping perceptions of what is possible, opening up whole new spheres of endeavor for others to play in. Pioneers, then.

Jack Kirby laid the groundwork for modern comics during the Golden Age, the 1940s, reconfiguring what had been a newspaper strip concept to a book concept. He invented romance comics in the 1950s. He revitalized the medium during the 1960s, in the process creating the Silver Age. Then, when he moved from Marvel to DC, he effected a lesser but real revolution with his Fourth World books.

All of this and much more you can glean from the magnificent mini-biography *Kirby: King of Comics* (Abrams, hardcover, $40.00, 224 pages, ISBN 978-0-8109-9447-8). Author Mark Evanier, himself a respected comics professional, knew Kirby intimately from 1969 until the elder artist's death in 1994. That twenty-five years of intimacy comes across vividly in the text, granting the book an insightful and authoritative heft that other second-hand assessments of Kirby's career might lack. And yet, honoring Kirby's dedication to truthfulness, Evanier also displays an objective journalistic mien. This is no puff piece, but rather one full of historical research and carefully weighted judgments.

Evanier—who is in the process of finishing a mammoth, full-scale biography of Kirby that will constitute hundreds of pages of text alone—gives us here a condensed portrait of the unique man who invented so many famous comics icons. From Kirby's rough-and-tumble, hard-scrabble NYC youth, through his apprenticeship and journeyman days, and into his brilliant mastery and partial decline. He neither minimizes nor exaggerates the commercial injustices Kirby underwent for most of his life, thereby producing a quiet but powerful moral message about creators and the marketplace. Evanier splits his text about equally between limning Kirby the man and Kirby the artist. He discloses both shaping biographical events and secrets of Kirby's art.

The choice illustrations go a long way toward fulfilling this latter goal. This oversized volume is a joy just to browse through, stuffed with riches. We see Kirby's dynamic penciled work, follow the disparate results of various levels of inking and coloring by others. Seldom-reprinted work vies with the occasional necessary milestone image, such as the cover to *Fantastic Four* #1. And there are a fair number of photographs of Kirby and the important people in his life, from different eras.

Evanier recounts an incident where Kirby came close to stating his esthetic credo: that transcending reality through depictions of super-heroism offers more insight into existence than mere mimesis. It's really the same credo that underlies all of fantasy and science fiction, and if our brand of literature has truly finally triumphed over naturalism today, much of the credit for that victory falls straight on the shoulders of Jack Kirby.

The Man Who Was F&SF

My heading to this review is a trifle misleading. For although Anthony Boucher—born William Parker White—was indeed the founder and original (co-) editor of *Asimov's* beloved cousin publication, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, he did not assume only that single role during his substantial but tragically abbreviated career. (Boucher died in 1968 of lung cancer complicated by other lifelong ills.) He held so many other roles as well, all of which he fulfilled to extremely high standards. Just how many others becomes apparent in *Anthony Boucher: A Biobibliography* (McFarland, trade paperback, $35.00, 223 pages, ISBN 978-0-7864-3320-9).

Critic and historian Jeffrey Marks, who has gone through Boucher's archived papers and conducted other plentiful research as well, divides his material—and Boucher's life—into four compartments. But these compartments, in turn subsectioned, are hardly watertight, no more than they would be in any creator's life. Still, it's a handy organizational format.

The first section of the book is titled simply "The Man." Here we get acquainted with Boucher's ancestors, his childhood (a somewhat sickly one, leading to a focus on reading and writing over more active pursuits), his education, and his courtship of his essential helpmeet Phyllis. We get a précis of his lifetime accomplishments, but then break away for a more detailed examination of the first aspect in the second chapter, "The Author."

Boucher began his literary career with a sale to *Weird Tales* at age fifteen. But that was a fluke, and it was only when he was twenty-six (1937) that he had his first real success with the publication of his initial mystery novel. We chart his mixed conquest of this field up until the year 1942, when he ceased writing mysteries. It's now time for "The Editor."

This third chapter covers not only Boucher's actual editorial accomplishments, but also his SF and fantasy writing. Marks has read seemingly everything by Boucher (including, curse him, unpublished manuscripts we can't see!), and gives sympathetic and insightful synopses that elucidate not only Boucher's methodologies and esthetics, but also relevant autobiographical and philosophical tidbits. This is the section where we can peruse the inside scoop about the founding of *F&SF* and how it almost never made it through its first year.

Our final survey of a dominant aspect of Boucher's life is "The Critic." Boucher wrote thousands of book reviews, and was during his heyday the predominant mystery-book reviewer in the country.

This rounds out 160 pages of the study, followed by a very thorough bibliography.

As a hardcore SF partisan, I can hardly agree with Marks's climactic conclusion that "Boucher's most enduring legacy has been his impact on the following generation of mystery reviewers." Wonderful as reviewers are (cough, cough), it's a tributary art form. It seems obvious to me that Boucher's shaping of our genre into more mature forms is where his legacy truly resides. But that's about my only cavil with this fine and essential book.

The thing about giants like Boucher is that as the years go on, they become figures of myth and high stature, living on in the minds of the current generation on some literary Olympus occupied by big thinking and parties filled with ambrosia and witty anecdotes. This biography, revealing the human frailties of the man, and especially his constant scrabbling for a paycheck (he never made more money annually than during his radio-scripting days, which ended in 1947, twenty years before his death!), restores the true dimensions of this person, rendering his feats even more worthy of honor and awe.

Wardrobian Pioneers

Perhaps you recall with personal fondness, or merely by reputation, the landmark Ballantine Adult Fantasy series,

helmed by Lin Carter, which brought so much classic and excellent pre-modern fantasy back into print, and helped establish the burgeoning dominance of that mode of genre fiction right after the initial Tolkien explosion of the 1960s. Well, for those elders who remember, and also for the novices who never experienced those glories, editor and scholar Douglas Anderson now delivers a volume that carries a very similar charge and freight of delights. (He even explicitly references Carter and his work in one of his fine story introductions.)

Anderson's new anthology *Tales Before Narnia* (Del Rey, trade paperback, $15.00, 340 pages, ISBN 978-0-345-49890-8) is a companion volume to his *Tales Before Tolkien* (2003). As with that previous volume and its focus on Tolkien's literary predecessors, Anderson is out to explicate the roots of the fiction of C.S. Lewis. And in a grander fashion than even its catchy but limiting title permits, the book will also seek to uncover the forerunners of all Lewis's fiction, not just the excursions into Narnia. Furthermore, its subtitle—"The Roots of Modern Fantasy and Science Fiction"—extends its remit even further, into that inclusive Lin Carter realm.

We start with a Longfellow poem, "Tegner's Drapa," which evokes Lewis's lifelong fascination with Scandinavia. "The Aunt and Amabel," by E. Nesbit, gives us a primal example of entry into another world via a magical wardrobe. Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen" is a welcome if obvious choice, with its prefiguring of Narnia's White Witch.

A chapter from Lewisian icon George MacDonald's *Phantastes* (1858) is succeeded by two items linked to MacDonald: Friederich de la Motte Fouqué's "Undine" and Valdemar Thisted's "Letters from Hell: Letter III." Another diabolical dialogue is contained in John Macgowan's "Fastosus and Avaro." Sir Walter Scott gives us a ghost story with "The Tapestried Chamber," while a fragment from Dickens, "The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton," tells of a bad man reformed.

The next story is one of my favorites of Anderson's selection, and introduces me to a writer I knew nothing of. Owen Barfield's "The Child and the Giant" starts out marvelously—"There was once a child who, having no mother and father, lived alone with a Giant in the middle of the deep forest."—and escalates to delirious surreal heights. Next—shades of Lin Carter's tastes—comes some William Morris, "A King's Lesson." And Robert Louis Stevenson ventures far afield—to Iceland of all places—for "The Waif Woman."

"First Whisper of *The Wind in the Willows*" is the fascinating prototype version of Kenneth Grahame's classic, as told via letters to his children. Rudyard Kipling introduces us to a place where agonies can be exchanged in "The Wish House." Then comes my second favorite piece, Charles Williams's "Et in Sempiternum Pereant." This story about a house of strange spirits contains a sentence that to me sums up the essence of the frissons this genre produces: "The fantasy of growing old, like the fantasy of growing up, was part of the ineffable sweetness, touched with horror, of existence, itself the lordliest fantasy of all."

And in the home stretch we find a poem by Tolkien, "The Dragon's Visit"; a G.K. Chesterton parable, "The Coloured Lands"; the one piece of true SF, Charles Hall's "The Man Who Lived Backwards"; a chapter from Roger Lancelyn Green's unpublished fantasy, "The Wood That Time Forgot"; and the brutal prison romance of William Lindsay Gresham's "The Dream Dust Factory."

Anderson's taste is impeccable, his sleuthing revelatory, and his fellow-feeling for Lewis and his works deep and abiding. Even if you're not hot off a theatrical viewing of the movie *Prince Caspian,* as I was when I read this (that film will probably be out on DVD when this review appears), you'll find that this anthology makes you want to revisit the work of every Inkling who ever inkled.

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A Book You Won't Want to Read

As anyone who has perused my humble introduction to Zoran Živković's *Impossible Stories* (2006) can attest, I hold this Serbian author in high regard. To me, he's one of the fraternity of great cosmopolitan fantasists that includes Borges, Murakami, Kafka, Lem, and García Marquez, simultaneously of his native country and also of all mankind. His work features a kind of Middle European *weltschmerz* tempered paradoxically by a buoyant, indomitable appreciation for life and its enigmas, an attitude that holds universal appeal to sensitive readers. (And testament to this appeal comes in the fact that we might even be seeing some of Živković's work on the big screen soon, as his novel *Hidden Camera* has been optioned by a U.K. company.)

His newest novel, *The Last Book* (PS Publishing, hardcover, $40.00, 196 pages, ISBN 978-1-906301-19-4) carries forward Živković's typical concerns and storytelling ambiguity, but also tries something new. For this novel is more or less a pure mystery tale atop its uncanny aspects. Introducer John Grant mentions Georges Simenon as a possible model, and I concur. In pellucid prose (once more superbly translated by Alice Copple-Tosić) arrayed in punchy short chapters full of deft, bantering dialogue, Živković

leads us through a labyrinth of death and meaning. The city of the tale is unnamed, but one assumes a Middle European place of quaint charms mixed with modernity. One of the eccentrically charming places is the Papyrus Bookstore, owned by Vera Gavrilović. But in a deviation from its staid, bookish atmosphere, the Papyrus has the misfortune of hosting three seemingly "natural" deaths among its innocent customers, in as many days—a sequence of events that naturally brings in the police, in the form of our narrator, Inspector Dejan Lukić. His investigations begin to turn up references to a volume called "the last book." It starts to seem as if this odd item is the cause of the deaths, the object of worship by a cult, the grail of a secret government agency—and the one thing Lukić both fears and desires to have. As a budding romance with Vera develops, the Inspector must also worry about her safety, as dire events continue to swirl about the little shop.

Živković's work has often dealt with metatextual matters and tropes, but he always grounds these playfully abstruse and intellectual motifs in solid, sensual reality, a tactic he continues to pursue here. The personalities of Vera and Dejan are solidly naturalistic and appealing, and the other lesser characters are fully fleshed in as well. I love Dejan's droll take on life. Consider one of his early comments to Vera: "You have greatly surpassed the average number of deaths in a bookstore." The whole thread of their teashop meetings (a venue that plays a larger part in the mystery than you at first might suspect) lends a quotidian sensory tangibility to the tale. The end result of Živković's sly maneuverings is a reading experience akin to a film by that master of subtle affrights, Val Lewton, specifically *The Seventh Victim* (1943). Enter this bookshop at your own risk!

Insert Name of Your Home Town Here

Readers who have already enjoyed Jeffrey Ford's subtly stunning and award-winning novella "Botch Town," included in his last collection, *The Empire of Ice Cream* (2006), will instantly flock to read his expansion of the tale in the form of his latest novel, *The Shadow Year* (William Morrow, hardcover, $25.95, 289 pages, ISBN 978-0-06-123152-0). Others who have not previously encountered the magic of "Botch Town"—yet who know the byline of Ford as belonging to one of our best contemporary fantasists—will be automatically drawn to the book. Perhaps some readers who perked up when Ford's *The Girl in the Glass* (2005) won an Edgar award will come over to this volume for its mainstream, suspense-novel packaging. But for whatever reason you might be drawn to *The Shadow Year*, rest assured that your rewards will be awesome. And for those who miss the book entirely—well, extend your sympathy and compassion their way, and maybe press the eventual paperback into their hands.

The novel is narrated by a young boy, middle child of a family composed of alcoholic Mom, overworked Dad, live-in grandparents, and the three kids. Yet this novel is hardly a YA book, no more than is Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Instead, it's a retrospective examination (that backward-looking aspect of the telling is subliminally present throughout, explicitly so by the end) of a few pivotal months in the life of a sensitive youngster, and all those around him—relatives, friends, adults, townspeople in general, and one icon of evil, Mr. White. It's a keen-eyed, compassionate, merciless examination of domesticity, morality, art and love, conformity and rebellion, by turns funny as an episode of *The Simpsons* or *Calvin and Hobbes*, and as bracingly grim as some nineteenth century Russian opus. In other words, pure Ford.

Our narrator, his big brother Jim and younger sister Mary live in a typical small town on Long Island, in the early 1960s. Their parents are working poor, and the kids are typical and believably normal in their juvenile concerns, mannerisms, and conversation. Yet they're really not, no more than is any child. The eccentricities and peculiarities and foibles of the children—and of most of the adults—

represent Ford's big thesis: that no one is "normal," that life is a botch we maneuver through by pratfall and improvisation, that all that sustains us is reliance on each other, and that to pretend otherwise is the Big Lie which society tries to inflict.

The main line of the plot concerns the depredations of Mr. White, evil prowler in darkness, and how the kids strive to foil him, employing their basement-confined scale model of the town as an augury of events. But the real wealth of the book lies in its evocation of a certain era in American life—the author's own youth—and also of the universality of childhood, rich with everyday marvels and commonplace miracles. Ford's understated tone and minute particularity and inclusion of just the perfect telling details insure that this village and the lives of its inhabitants will be as real to you as your own childhood milieu. ❍

NEXT ISSUE

APRIL/MAY DOUBLE ISSUE

Next month we celebrate all that is fine and good about science fiction in our April/May double issue; a bargain at any price, for it has two excellent novellas on offer, as well as a piquant melange of shorter works, all by some of the best writers in the genre.

APRIL/MAY NOVELLAS

Our lead novella, with a striking cover image courtesy of SF artist **Paul Youll**, is **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**'s "The Spires of Denon," a stand-alone addition to her popular "Diving into the Wreck" universe. This time we find a group of archaeologists, a crack duo of cave divers, and a no-nonsense security-leader, all with cloudy motives, somehow working together to comprehend the alien purpose of the titular spires. By story's end, you'll find that nothing on Denon is quite what it seems. Next, we have **Brian Stableford**'s grand conclusion to his series of not-exactly-Elizabethan space operas, "The Great Armada." Dee, Drake, and the rest of the motley historical cast (with some surprising additions, as well as a golem) must take the initiative against the Selenites directly into space, with the aid of their own flotilla of etheric attack ships. The final battle versus these invaders will surely lead to Fleshcore, arachnid, and human casualties. Who lives? Who dies? Read and find out.

ALSO IN APRIL/MAY

But that's not all: SF legend **Kate Wilhelm** returns with the discomfiting story of "An Ordinary Day with Jason"; **Deborah Coates** charms with an SF concept straight out of the pleasant dreams of *this* managing editor: "Cowgirls in Space"; **Chris Beckett** returns with P.K. Dick-inspired mind-mangler "Atomic Truth"; **Nancy Kress** gives us a sneak-peek at a future-culture game of telephone in "Exegesis"; **Robert Reed** considers the merits and dangers of "True Fame"; **Michael Swanwick & Eileen Gunn** team up for the nightmare invasion of "The Armies of Elfland"; **Jack Skillingstead** pens the tale of a desperate, paranoid man's "Human Day"; and **Damien Broderick**'s fine "This Wind Blowing, and This Tide" explores a mysterious alien shipwreck on Saturn's moon Titan with a decidely unusual science team!

Our April/May issue will be on sale at your newsstands on March 3, 2009.

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

In the month of February, I think readers of Asimov's would particularly enjoy Boskone, CapriCon and Potlatch. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 2009

30–Feb. 1—**Creation.** For info, write: **217 S. Kenwood, Glendale CA 91205.** Or phone: **(818) 409-0960** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) **creationent.com.** (E-mail) **tickets@creationent.com.** Con will be held in: Los Angeles CA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the LAX Marriott. Guests will include: Tony Todd. Commercial media-oriented event. "Xena" theme.

30–Feb. 1—**ConFlikt. conflikt.org.** Seattle WA. Seanan McGuire, Frank Hayes, Lawrence Dean. SF/fantasy folksinging.

30–Feb. 1—**ConJour. con-jour.ndos.net.** Univ. of Houston, Clear Lake TX. Gaming, media, SF, fantasy and horror.

FEBRUARY 2009

6–8—**SuperCon. supercon.info. chebutykin@visi.com.** Brentwood Courtyard Suites, Rochester MN. Low-key relax-a-con.

6–8—**Florida Extravaganza. (407) 650-3810. fxshow.com.** Convention Center, Orlando FL. Takei, Adam West, Erik Estrada.

6–8—**IkkiCon. ikkicon.com.** Austin TX. Anime.

6–8—**UK Filk Con. contabile.org.** Ramada, Grantham. "Hitch" Wheatley, Rand Bellavia, Adam English. SF/fantasy folksinging.

6–8—**SF Ball. +44 0709281 2101. sfball.com.** Carrington House Hotel, Bournemouth UK. Peter Jurasik, Stephen Furst.

13–15—**Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 623-2311. boskone.org.** Boston MA. J. Walton, I. Gallo, Dr. SETI.

13–15—**Farpoint, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20601. (410) 579-1257.** Timonium (Baltimore) MD. Trek and other media SF.

13–15—**Gallifrey, Box 8022, Los Angeles CA 91406. gallifreyone.com.** G. Harper, J. Moran, P. Cornell, T. Hadoke. Dr. Who.

13–15—**KatsuCon, Box 3354, Crofton MD 21114. katsucon.org.** Hyatt Crystal City, Arlington VA (near DC). Anime.

13–15—**KawaKon, 7333 B Hardscrapple Dr., St. Louis MO 63123. kawacon.org.** Crowne Plaza Clayton. J. Taylor. Anime.

19–22—**CapriCon, 126 E. Wing #244, Arlington Hts. IL 60004. capricon.org.** Westin, Wheeling (Chicago) IL. S. Shinn.

19–22—**SpaceFest, Box 37197, Tucson AZ 85740. (520) 888-2424. spacefest.info.** San Diego. Aldrin. Space development.

20–22—**ConDFW, 750 S. Main #14, Keller TX 76248. www.condfw.org.** Dallas TX. Jim Butcher, David Weber.

20–22—**ConNooga. connooga.com. info@connooga.com.** Choo Choo Holiday Inn, Chattanooga TN. "Multi-fandom."

20–22—**Furry Fiesta. furryfiesta.org.** Addison (Dallas area) TX. Anthropomorphics.

20–22—**UK Nat'l. Con, 26 King's Meadow View, Wetherby LS22 7FX, UK. smof.com/redemption.** Britannia, Coventry UK.

27–Mar. 1—**Potlatch, c/o Box 3400, Berkeley CA 94705. potlatch-sf.org.** Domain, Sunnyvale CA. Readers and writers.

27–Mar. 1—**SheVaCon, Box 416, Verona VA 24482. shevacon.org.** Holiday Inn Tanglewood, Roanoke VA. Niven, Brindle.

27–Mar. 1—**ConCave, c/o Box 3221, Kingsport TN 37664. (423) 239-3106. ccaveman1@earthlink.net.** Horse Cave KY.

MARCH 2009

1—**Invasion, 643 Longbridge Rd., Dagenham RM8 2DD, UK. tenthplanetevents.co.uk.** London UK. Baker, Aldred. Dr. Who.

6–8—**MarsCon, Box 21213, Eagan MN 55121. (651) 339-0397.** Holiday Inn, Bloomington MN. The Rosemas. Relax-a-con.

6–8—**ConSonance, 1448 Carlson Blvd., Richmond CA 94804. consonance.org.** Milpitas CA. SF/fantasy folksinging.

6–8—**Creation, 217 S. Kenwood, Glendale CA 91205. (818) 409-0960. creationent.com.** Crowne Plaza, Cherry Hill NJ.

7—**Time Quest, 643 Longbridge Rd., Dagenham RM8 2DD, UK. tenthplanetevents.co.uk.** London UK. Tom Baker. Dr. Who.

13–15—**StellarCon, Box F-4, EUC, UNCG, Greensboro NC 27412. stellarcon.org.** Radisson. Wold, Stout, Wick, Pederson.

AUGUST 2009

6–10—**Anticipation, CP 105, Montreal QC H4A 3P4. anticipationsf.ca.** Gaiman, Hartwell, Doherty. WorldCon. US$/C$215.

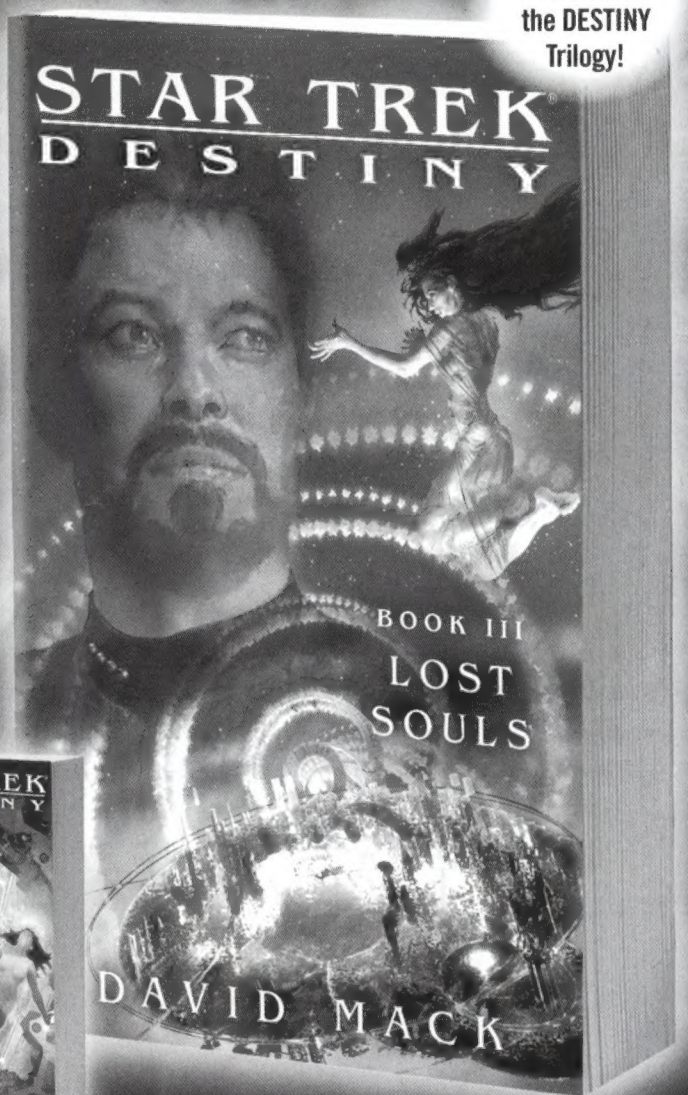
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2–6—**Aussiecon 4, GPO Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. aussiecon4.org.au.** The World SF Convention. US$90.

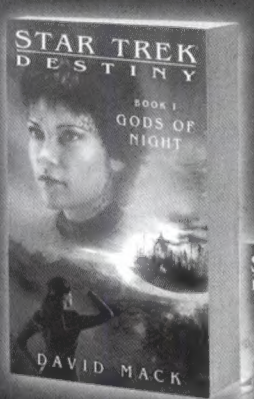
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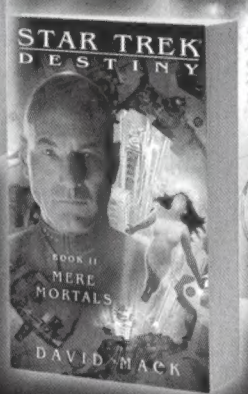
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